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FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG



Francis Brett Young

by

E. G. TWITCHETT

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To KIT

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I

PRELIMINARIES AND DEFINITIONS

I

THE BARE FACTS

FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG was born at Hales Owen in 1884. The time and the place and the boy were exactly right. Had any factor been absent we should probably have had no Brett Young novels of any kind. Certainly we should not have had anything like the novels we know him by. For Providence or the Muses, the life-force or the evolutionary principle in the English novel, set him thus at the geographical heart of that war which industrialism and its auxiliaries wage invincibly (yet never quite triumphantly) against agriculture, individualism and the real England; and set him at the most interesting stage of a major tactical operation in it—the end of the temporary ascendancy, the breakdown of the charge, as one might say, of the ‘heavy’ industries. The iron-masters were beginning to call for their horoscopes, and the works clerks to review their savings.

But Geography, as Mr. E. C. Bentley failed to point out in his otherwise exhaustive summary, is more valuable to some people than Biography. Inside a circle drawn round Hales Owen with a radius of twenty-five miles there are samples of every kind of English soil, person and occupation. Our very latest improvements throng the north-eastern quadrant, which just covers Stafford in the north and reaches to the suburbs of Burton-on-Trent. Birmingham, that Thebes of the coal measures, dominates the south-eastern quadrant which, however, includes edges of the hum-

drum Black Country so far as Nuneaton and, at its southernmost extremity rises almost to Bredon Hill. Due west the circle takes in the outskirts of Ludlow; and Bridgenorth is five miles within the rim on the north-west. So much for walking distance, or at least for what used to be considered a fairly comfortable day's walk until the hikers came, and demonstrated how greatly we had been exaggerating. From the Clents one sees three times as far.

He was born in a pleasant, red-brick doctor's house, surrounded by a garden, in the residential quarter of the town—if the busy little place may be said to have had a residential quarter. For the casual visitor, the minute purposefulness of Hales Owen and its neat activity take the eye to the exclusion of all else. It is a toy Black Country town. Its business is grim and earnest enough, Heaven knows (and so now does Parnassus) but, as will abundantly appear, there are the remnants of a delicate detachment about it all. It does not quite join up with the general dirtiness of that patch of the Midlands. Its very spoil-banks strike an apologetic overtone and, as it were, a faint harmonic note.

In the 'eighties and 'nineties these harmonics were more evident. In those days the collieries and foundries were new, as such things go, and stood aloof; and the general air was filled with a thin noise of small private hammers. The generality of Hales Owen, from time immemorial, had been given over to the manufacture of nails, in which trade each man worked at home. All that, of course, is over. The domestic nail-houses are still architecturally extant in the shape of outbuildings joined up with the cottages; but their tintinnabulations have long ceased and the

men are all gone to the works. There is not a nail-house but is diverted to the purposes of sanitation or of stowage; Divine Providence, or the evolutionary economic principle, as one chooses to think of it (but not in this instance the Muses), having just failed to arrange that they should admit motor-bicycles and side-cars.

Birmingham is less than seven miles away. But on the other hand an hour's stroll, or so, may bring almost the oldest inhabitant within sight of the piled quietness of Wales. This juxtaposition in great part composes our story; certainly it is its first cause. Hales Owen is the 'Halesby' of the novels, and one of Mr. Brett Young's few 'real' portraits of places. A child cannot escape reality however much he may re-arrange it, or a poet the child. 'Fatherless Bairn,' that devastating mine, with its unusual powers of denouement, is still to be seen from 'Uffdown' (the mine is working again); but what was, for our present inquisitive purposes, the most significant institution of all exists no longer. This was a great integrated concern, handling coal, iron, bricks and forgings, called the New British Iron Company. Greatly aspiring amid the drums of the 'seventies, it crashed in the 'nineties. It owned the Hawne Colliery ('Great Mawne'), Old Hawne Hall with its cherry orchard (blighted) at the back of it, and Corngreaves Hall ('Mawne Hall') where Mr. Brett Young's step-grandfather, who was managing director, dwelt in state. It lies entire at the bottom of *The Iron Age*, and shreds of its debris bestrew almost every other novel.

The house in which *The Black Diamond* opens lies just round the corner from the surgery. Over beyond the Clents there are a few country residences of the

newer local magnates. Betwixt and between may be sought, or inferred, at least the germs of most of the houses and places in the Midland novels. The Dakers' house still stands out towards Walton Hill, near the abandoned railway-station which Mr. Dakers senior used to and from his cryptic corset-selling.

Mr. Brett Young's father was in medical practice in Hales Owen—has, indeed, not long retired from it. His mother, who was of a Midland medical family, died in 1898. To this early loss, for our callous purposes, we may attribute gain. It is an event which, when it occurs in his childhood, has a profound and far-reaching effect on a creative artist. One of our author's present regrets (thus do things work in the mind of a poet) is that he omitted, in the press of boyhood's affairs, to pay back entirely the sum of pennies that he borrowed from her handbag, which hung on a door-handle for months afterwards, containing household small-change and a few palliatives against migraine. We may assume, I think, that among the shades the debt is held to have been discharged.

The paternal line came from the Mendip country, where the family had lived in humble circumstances—miners most of them—for at least two centuries. In *The Young Physician* something of this atmosphere is recreated. There is a tradition that they were Cornish (Brythonic) in origin, and for my part I should not quarrel with any ethnologist, or current scientific critical worker, who might trace affiliations to that mysterious people in the steady practical mysticism of the earlier novels, the legendary attachments of the later, and the fairy-tale influence over them all. Neither would Mr. Brett Young.

Two rounded hills lie in isolation just outside

Hales Owen. Indeed they are more than hills, these Clents—Clent Hill and Walton Hill. They are at least technically mountains for they touch the thousand foot level. Gentle in curvature and easy of ascent, they are generous in prospect. Walton Hill, from which nearly all of Mid Wales is either to be seen or else surmised, was the principal playground of the boy. He ate innumerable sandwiches on its summit, dreamed innumerable dreams all over it, rolled down every grassy declivity available, and read his beloved Shenstone there, many times over, within sight of Shenstone's white Leasowes, three miles off on the Birmingham side of the plain. Walton Hill is the 'Uffdown' of the novels; and there is little that happens in them that does not take place somewhere in the glorious vista which spreads in all directions from its gorsy slopes, with half the romance of Wales on the one hand and the source of half the power of England on the other.

Water, always an attraction to the poet in him, was represented by the river Stour, not then very degraded, and by a great pool, now silting up like all the water in that country save what is carried in conduits. Throughout his boyhood the workmen enlisted by the Birmingham Corporation were laying the pipes which should bring the Birmingham water supply from the back of Radnorshire; and as he grew older he ranged on his bicycle far afield, examining their excavations and edifices.

The scene was set for a report of the onsets of modernity on the peace of England. And there for all practical purposes, so far as the duties—and the privileges—of criticism go, terminates nine-tenths of our biographical introduction. The thousand details

which complete that framework have been filled in, expanded, and a little disguised, by a better hand.

The boy was removed from his explorations, and from the noble sight (and sound) of the workmen in his father's surgery, to go to school at Epsom College in Surrey, an establishment with a foundation for doctors' sons, where music played perhaps a larger part in the curriculum than in most public schools; and he took his medical degrees at Birmingham University. Of the earlier scholastic years, the atmosphere is re-created again in *The Young Physician*, and of the later, in *My Brother Jonathan*.

The doctor, full-fledged, began to practise in Brixham in 1907, and, except for one intermission, a voyage to Japan as ship's surgeon in the first part of that year (of which there is almost no hint in the novels, and hardly a trace in his memory) continued there until the War. Devon was not his line of country any more than was the Far East; but it is a good place in which to observe men. *Deep Sea* is the document for that period and probably there is nothing autobiographical in it. He married Jessie Hankinson, in 1908; and they tramped together over every inch along the Birmingham pipe-line and visited most of the narrow valleys of Central Wales. One such great walk occupied the week in which the King's Coronation was celebrated and may be counted, perhaps, as the most important revivification of the springs of boyhood's memory. It was recapitulated, almost by chance, on the day of His Majesty's Jubilee—in a few hours—out of courtesy to a reviewer of novels, scraping up material.

In 1915, Mr. Brett Young joined up in the R.A.M.C. and the medical practice was continued on a larger

scale. Those things are told, obliquely, in *Marching on Tanga*.

He was invalided, with the rank of Major, in 1918, and after a brief spell of recuperating and instructing on Salisbury Plain (where Time, as we know Time in England, is manifestly the greatest landed proprietor, and may be considered, perhaps, as the last supreme influence on the novels) they went to live in Capri. There they spent years in community with many sun-loving novelists not too well provided for, helping, amongst other things, D. H. Lawrence to a house and, it may be, an occasional diagnosis. Mr. Compton Mackenzie, rather better provided for than most, was a regular resident there. Something of that atmosphere is to be found in *White Ladies*, and a little, a very little, a transmuted thousandth, in Mr. Norman Douglas's *South Wind*.

The novels had brought Mr. Brett Young till then, and were to continue to bring him for ten years more, small sums in the way of royalties, although a great deal of credit. If it were not that there is eventually a critical point to be made on that subject it would be invidious to emphasize the fact. It is the familiar lot of men who listen to none but their internal voices. In the meantime its mundane effects are all that is noteworthy about it. To leave Capri with any regularity, even in the summers, from 1919 to 1929, was found not to be feasible. The year 1922, however, Mr. and Mrs. Brett Young spent in South Africa, and *Woodsmoke* and *Pilgrim's Rest* came of that holiday.

Portrait of Clare appeared in 1927; and they passed the summers of 1929 to 1932 at Esthwaite Lodge, near Hawkshead, in the Lake District. Water reigns here; and water was brought to an apotheosis in the tale of

the Tregarons. There were two visits to America, expatriations still undocumented; and Craycombe House, which may perhaps be counted hereafter among the influences, was bought in 1933.

Those are the bare and obvious facts which accompany a considerable spiritual progress. The curves of that counterpoint it will be necessary to follow in greater detail; indeed, since we are dealing with a poet and not a note-taker, we shall do little else.

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As for the places in the novels, most of them are composite pictures. Thus 'Wychbury' is more or less Clent and 'Stourton,' Stourbridge. 'Chaddesbourne D'Abitot' (first mentioned by the way in *The Black Diamond*, where Cookson the farmer, who ends unhappily in *This Little World*, shot Abner's dog) is near Chaddesley Corbett. 'Lesswardine' is not Leintwardine but something between that and Knighton, below Clun Forest. The 'Trewern' of *Jim Redlake* lies somewhere under Radnor Forest. The Hingston's mansion was invented on the far side of the Clents, more or less on the site of Lord Cobham's Hagley Hall. Clare's house at 'Uffdown' was put in the valley below Shut Mill and the Sling fishponds—silting inevitably. Jonathan's 'Wednesford' is a composite Black Country town; and 'Wolverbury' is not quite Wolverhampton. The 'Brimsley' of *My Brother Jonathan* is roughly Romsley. *The House under the Water* is, of course, in the Elan Valley whence comes the Birmingham pipe-line; but 'Forest Fawr' is made more towering and terrible than the Rhayader massif. *The Dark Tower* all takes place in Black Mountain country—a blend of the remoter districts with the

immediate neighbourhood of Llanthony Abbey, where Landor tried to live, and strove, contrary to his better judgment and his own impression, with many. There was a Delahay, the last of the historical race, in Urishay Castle, not very far from Vowchurch; and there was a doctor in Welsh Hay who married a gipsy girl and was said to have died mysteriously. It is strangely, though unfairly, in keeping with the wry, grim dignity of that really most hospitable old border town that it should be associated even to this day with stories of poison as well as with the dim echo of the noise of swords—with spite as well as war—and be as little hurt by either association as, say, the mediæval papal office.

Jim Redlake's villages share with 'Halesby' the distinction of being 'real.' They are all strung out in the country which hunting men call 'High Leicestershire.' There the boy spent many of his holidays; and 'Thorpe Folville' is Somerby, where his maternal grandfather ('Doctor Weston') practised and hunted.

We shall find a few more resemblances and a number of faint auxiliary influences as we proceed. But these are comparatively light diversions. Graver matters are immediately before us. We approach the Form of the Novel.

II

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE NOVEL

IN concert with many golden voices—with the remote cavernous murmur of Henry James no less than with the more agile eloquence of Mr. Middleton Murry and the measured friendliness of Mr. E. M. Forster—the accents of Mr. Percy Lubbock have addressed the novel-reader almost in vain. The short-sighted innocent resolutely stumbles on. Faust was hardly more oblivious of the preluding of archangels in heaven.

This apathy, like all forms of anæsthesia, has its compensations, but it is a pity on the whole. Our unrelaxed inattention has been fortunate enough for that steady body of men, the expert critics of fiction, who else must have departed in droves, long ago, from Sunday newspapers and publishers' antechambers to other forms of detention and employment—the Government service, perhaps, or the manipulation of greyhounds; but it has deprived educated Englishmen of a great deal of quiet delight. No startled hegira will darken the horizons of literature in our time, nor is any peace likely to settle on the plains where dwell the unprofessional readers of novels. We shall continue to bellow intelligently for our middlemen whenever we are in the presence of Art.

Indeed, as our middlemen, themselves ungratefully, never tire of telling us, we are a most ungrateful people. We do not deserve that publicists, or even artists, should continue to labour for us. We will not

drop in at the National Gallery, we do not visit the British Museum, except to see the Codex Sinaiticus or some other raree show, and we will not hold our works of art, not even our novels of genius, up to the light of reason. We continue, those of us who have the leisure to read at all, to sip elegantly at their brims, reserving our intellectual appetites for the examination of cross-word puzzles or of chess problems, or perhaps to study the beliefs and ideals of Members of Parliament. And yet every novel worthy of the name has been as elaborately prepared, as ingeniously put forward, and as attractively moulded, as any of the works of man. A fine mind has drawn upon a full heart, even sometimes upon a wide experience, and has made a shapely thing by the light of one unusually personal point of view, out of a private moral bias and a private theory of the soul in its relations with the universe. The 'story'—the surface import with which we are all too apt to content ourselves—while as indispensable as the taste to a meal, is no more, if no less, valuable.

A novel should be at first surveyed as a piece of craftsmanship, *The Craft of Fiction*, Mr. Lubbock's ultimate exhortation lays it down, held up to reason to be explored for form and direction, and then approached craftily and warily, as the traditional gourmet approaches good food; neither in gloating nor in doubt, but so that the last eventual nutrition may be extracted from the feast. As with the picture, the poem, or the carvings on the railway offices, so with the novel one must strive after the complete æsthetic event. Even mere enjoyment must become aware of itself if it is to be full and lasting; if (to take not unthankful leave of an over-facile metaphor) it is to be attended by a well-disposed

digestive apparatus and to end in assimilation. The argument is not so villainously stuffy as may appear at first hearing; for, in the last analysis, the novel at all levels, like every other kind of artistic creation, is simply food for experience.

It will at this point be urged, or at least it ought to be, that where Henry James, Mr. Forster, Mr. Lubbock and Mr. Middleton Murry are chanting in chorus in vain, a solitary halting pipe ought not to attempt to be heard. And that might well be just, were it indeed an unaccompanied instrument. But, as I shall labour to show, it does but play before an array of fiction, already widely loved, the various work of one man of genius (young as novelists go) of which the slightest volume has a sweet compound note that repays the closest attention. This body of work contains pieces of finished artistry at once more traditional and more contemporary than we have any right to expect in prose in a febrile age; and those that are not perfect in their kind, even the comparative failures, are unusually shapely and interesting.

The novel is food for experience and has been prepared to that end. It should not be consumed without being savoured; and as it cannot be savoured without being read, we may consider that we are not really reading the slightest novel, if novel it really is, until we are re-reading it; or until by some other process or intervention we begin to apprehend the reasons for its geographical and temporal setting, for its style, its shape and its characterization; until we are in possession, in effect, of the author's aims and aspirations, if not (as some authorities hold, though by no means the four whose names I have invoked) of such documents also as will enable us to judge of his

domestic activities, his aches and pains and his answers under psychoanalysis. Were it not for the need of lightening this necessary labour, of supplying this necessary foreknowledge, such solemnities as the present study would be the merest parasites upon the body of literature even though they might have vitality enough to be lively ones. Which normally, alas, they have not.

The novel, then, contains values and meanings on a number of levels. On the first and most obvious it has a 'plot,' an intrigue, a mystification, a development or clash of character: some immediate human interest which, suitably prefaced and paraphrased, might not unutterably bore an Australian aboriginal. Upon this level a majority of its readers in a more sophisticated hemisphere will be content to remain, since there lie its roots in history and three-quarters of its appeal. The novel does not descend in the direct line from the epic, whatever it may have become the custom to advance in professorial whimsies; but it has long been next in the line of succession and now duly inherits. It is a device of urban civilization, called into existence to supply a group of satisfactions which urban civilization tends to exclude.

Its first office, therefore, is to reveal how people live and the kinds of things which they do, and so gratify a part of that zest for the discovery of life, that passion for vicarious experience, which even-handed progress denies to the transitory leaseholders of flats and villas and, now that the manor-house is never out of the market or the motor-car in the garage, has begun to deny equally to the old village labourer, gossiping over his gate. That factory-hand in Russia who, asked why he read books, remarked,

perhaps a trifle priggishly: 'To learn the right way of living,' had clearly the rights of it although the Congress which drew him out clucked for days over him. One can imagine the spirit which was Mathew Arnold hovering in approbation for a while, avuncular, above that unlikely country. On this superficial plane the novel earns its livelihood. Later, perhaps, the new Italianate kind of football-match and an improved talkie and broadcasting service will relieve it of that burden and release its energies entire for the exploration of true inwardness towards which already its younger exponents, steadily, sub-conscious to subconscious, are marching. In the meantime it discharges the dangerous duties of Scheherazade deceased.

But the novelist, even the novelist also, must have his fun. Having gained attention and a subsidy, he proceeds to display his art. And first he must be allowed his choice of ground. Therefore, on a second level, the novel has an historical and a geographical setting, a landscape and a provenance, however vague and fantastical; and here, too, though here it grows more private, it has still the rudiments of appeal to all contemporaries and neighbours.

But now the channel of communication narrows rapidly. For, less attractive to the reader although more urgent for the writer, there ferments the impulse to idiosyncratic expression, which is at once his first cause and final justification. The novel externalizes its author and grants him his wishes. Therefore we find on a third level the novelist's personal culture, upbringing, learning, complexes and all, from which it draws its manner of telling, its choice of words and references, and the urgencies of growth which give it

its shape. Here reside its true themes and, in grave cases, its high moral purposes. Hereabouts, under hatches, the Freudian wish, that inchoate irrepressible, awaits fulfilment, muttering; and from this level it is that the critic climbs theocratic, in the guise we know him by, clutching his book with an air of dustily emerging from trackless labyrinths and copyright interviews with the Minotaur.

This last solemnity we shall as far as possible avoid. For, let it be agreed at once in heaviest parenthesis, the airs of the critic sit ill upon him. He does but reside, a little longer than most, among fundamentals which all men have used familiarly on their day. He is articulate, it is true, but a little of that goes a very long way. He cherishes foreign leanings more often than not, and babbles of Flaubert and Stendhal, foreigners it would seem and Frenchmen most likely. A dry corruption has attacked his garments and parts of his person, a corruption which it would be more suitable to conceal than to go about flaunting. His intellectual pretensions (or those, if you come to that, of anybody else) ought to be exploded in any decent open-air country, and it is to be hoped that now we are all educated the great heart of the English people will despatch counter-missionaries against him. The problem of why China does not convey to Western Europe a sufficiency of Buddhist priests and Taoists in exchange for our unending export of theological philosophers, has long exercised the fair-minded; but at least we may look for that dawn not to be too long delayed in which we shall welcome the first critical kitchen-maid, all love and langour, making accessible to us the workshop ethics and urges of, say, Mrs. Elinor Glynn. But that is by the way.

In the novels of some writers these three stages and their subterranean annexes are easily distinguishable; in the novels of others, not so easily. Some gain in beauty or improve in perspective when looked at closely, some provide unsuspected feasts of reason; some others—quite on the contrary, as the Channel passenger said when asked if he had dined. There have hardly ever been better laboratory specimens for the students of the Novel than the books of Joseph Conrad, in which the extraordinarily diverse stresses of different periods in his evolution, all persistent, combined with his unusual consciousness of his prose-style, his alternative languages, and his advantages of collaboration with Mr. Ford Madox Ford, seem to have so wrought as almost to petrify them, chapter by chapter, incident by incident, in slabs. One may study in them the Slavonic temperament telling with the highest empressement and utmost urgency, in an idiom not its own, with Gallic observances, of English dutiful attitudes and attitudinizings; the whole agitated battery being concentrated on setting forth parables of the international traffic of the sea.

That is an extreme instance. The stratification is rarely so distinct. Nevertheless, with attention it can always be discerned, and few more profitable or amusing excursions are to be had in literature than those which travel through some one particular form of this literary art, looking out from this bird's-eye viewpoint: over the contemporary English novel, for instance, from Conrad past Barrie, with his quaint emotional arrests and gushes, to the more average novelists (average in this if not in talent) such as Arnold Bennett, his bright guest-like spirit hymning, staccato, the pilgrim souls of Midland men; and Mr. Wells, whose vaster mind

works not dissimilarly but not at all so neatly; and so on to the cases of relative fusion.

For there are novelists in whose work the stratification is not at all plain. These are the writers who live in one whole piece; whose approach to life is constitutionally poetical, in whom all experience goes to maintain one fierce central fire—of Justice, perhaps, as in Galsworthy, or of Scorn, as in the best of *les jeunes*; or of simple love of Beauty and pity for her plight, as in our present author. This last fire, which has been burning before us almost unobserved till lately, many good judges have come to believe to be amongst the most intense of them all, if not among the brightest or farthest reaching. Certainly so far as it may be granted to an artist, working on a comprehensive scale in our multifarious civilization, to melt and imbue into one mounting system the many movements of his mind, it has been granted to Mr. Francis Brett Young. Slow to be perceived, the fact is now widely commented upon. 'He has an individual talent for the true marriage of landscape with incident,' remarked one of our greatest newspapers, oddly but soundly, inspired by *The House Under The Water*. It might have enriched the metaphor by adding that the talent is polygamous.

The closer the marriage, and the more complete the fusion, the more necessary to an appreciation of this promethean and vital output, with its glowing core and its pastoral covering, is the process of separation. Let us begin, as indeed many have begun, by examining its setting in time and place and social economy and take what help is to be found on those planes to the consideration of themes and meanings; leaving the stories to reassemble themselves—which is to say,

to speak for themselves—as they have been doing, most of them, these many years.

Mr. Francis Brett Young is a doctor and a poet and only then a novelist. He is familiar with the airs of the West Country of England, which assemble in his neighbourhood wherever he goes. His theme is the disaster of Beauty. He attempts at all times the unattainable. His failures may be reckoned on the fingers of one hand.

■

III

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE NOVEL

THE approach to literature through landscape is still in the end as gentle and spacious as ever it was in the age of outdoor anthologists, but it has the disadvantage, nowadays, of landing us at first in an unpleasantly congested area. We have first to penetrate a smoke-cloud and a hubbub; for the old-world courtesy of allotting territorial rights and boundaries to novelists has been lamentably overdone in recent years.

It is a sign of our kindly times thus to revive the rituals, and this feudalism of the mind is as deliberate and well-meaning as the similar and equally courteous proliferation of peerages. Yet it aims, as these do, at the approval and applause of a newly arrived audience, not bargained for by the fountains of honour. No doubt it must be gratifying to the chosen, encouraging to hikers and favourable to hotel-keepers, but it depresses the educated countryman beyond words and it is not even to be recommended as a starting point for topographers or critics. The critic must take hold somewhere, of course; and the topographer, for his part, cannot quite afford to neglect the impression which his vales and villages make on a sensitive and articulate admirer. But the relationship between a work of art and its setting in time and space is rarely of the first intimacy, as ideally it ought to be. It is on the lower levels that relationships proceed by unalterable law. If a writer persistently recurs to a

particular countryside it is more often because he knows it than because he needs it. It will be a geographical convenience as a rule and not an artistic symbol.

Pursued with ardour, these courtesies, like others less monumental, have only too obviously the most unfortunate results. We all know the kind of adoring thesis to which they give rise: *The Blankshire of Miss Dash* is the distressing formula. Already the Home Counties are hardly more infested with haversacked youths and picnicking owner-drivers than with the colonizing enthusiasms of some kinds of journalist. And, now that travel and the faculty of spelling out words are being so alarmingly fostered, the nuisance is spreading. One can foresee the time when the serenest corner of Somerset will seem to bristle with signposts and winsome tea-shops, indicating the gaunt abstractions which Mr. John Cowper Powys, himself imperfectly familiar with the county, has laboured to establish in it; and not the least of the virtues and glories of Mr. Theodore Powys, his ingenious relative, may come to be the care with which he has preserved the anonymity of that long, low-lying countryside of his, where the false tooth outshines the ploughshare.

The trouble works the other way round even more insidiously. One can never see an artist in proper proportion again once one has meditated and mouthed over him for any length of time wrong side up. Solemnity is the most dangerous of indulgences. If one is to be solemn, one must be solemn in a proper manner, as they say in the nursery. Half the readers of Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith and of the late Miss Mary Webb, to seek no further among imponderables, are so penetrated with the guide-book spirit that

they fail to apprehend the not unpleasing feminine inventions which those writers wreath almost fortuitously around the hinterland of Hastings and the orchards of Shropshire. They look for the airs of a county and, receiving a burr of doubtful dialect and a budget of place-names, are not aware that they should be disappointed, which is bad for them and not too good for the Novel.

Those novel writers, in fact, are rare and greatly to be prized, who while they exalt, contrive neither to overshadow nor to be overshadowed by, their chosen environment. They have picked their ground for more than accidental reasons. Most usually, indeed, it has picked them. They are the least parochial of writers. Their insatiable appetites and sound digestions for small events and stray notions caught in the vortices of the mind, combined with exact mental tuning and mental training, inevitably incline them towards the methods of poetry even although they should never have found it necessary to venture into metre. Mr. E. M. Forster is an example, a writer not usually considered from the geographical side or claimed from the poetical. He is very sparing with his topographical effects; but on those occasions when he chooses to involve himself in such minutiae, he works, as always, with exquisite and instinctive precision, choosing the more cheerful reaches of Hertfordshire to illuminate the beginnings of his most memorable domestic tragedy, and the overhung valleys of the Long Mynd for its human culmination; or the suns of India for tinting into visibility under his discriminating intellectual glass the pukka blood, bluey flowing, of the professional sahib. Observe, too, how exactly he uses the semi-suburbia of the depths of Surrey. And

H. M. Doughty and Mr. Norman Douglas, geologists both, can be watched with profit to this question on their more unprofessional occasions. Of this kind is Mr. Brett Young, and his country is his by right of delicate insinuation; although even in his investiture there has been too much ceremony about the title-deeds.

There remains little of England that has not been parcelled out among the laborious. Yet, with all this encroachment and enclosure, the most interesting and one of the most beautiful tracts, that mighty, stumbling slope which at first dips from the Pennines and then mounts obliquely up by the industrial Midlands to the Welsh border, has remained unstaked, almost unvisited even, by songsters or other artists. This is the more remarkable, since it is a perfect epitome of England, historically as well as geographically. Gradual and serene in feature, like all substantial English country, it is yet full of the subtlest contrasts. It contains the oldest part of Britain and the most recent developments. It changes imperceptibly from the Jurassic edge to the granite uplands, from the New to the Old Red Sandstone; producing on the way, fortuitously as it were, some of the most ancient and fantastic hills in the world. It starts at great purblind municipalities, groping for each other with tramways between, perched on the Eastern watersheds to cluster near their precious coal-measures; it tumbles in a gracious confusion through farms and orchards, immemorably ripe, and ends sharply with little stone townships, sullen and uncommunicating, shut in cup-like seclusion. It confronts the most Saxon counties of England with the most Celtic of Welsh Wales, and passes from the amenities of comfortable trades-

unionism to the taciturnity and xenophobia which still exist on the Border. For in those parts there is still to be seen the track of the shadow of marauding war. Of course only the smallest kind of racial tension exhibits itself to the passer-by. The local newspapers work together for peace. Highlanders and Lowlanders have composed their overt differences here as elsewhere over the globe, in an interchange of customs and an abandonment of idioms. No mountain clan in Western Europe has manifested collective individuality since Louis XIV abolished the Pyrenees.

Nevertheless, there is that about these slight border hills of ours which neither the railways nor their successors have so far availed to abolish. They are uncommonly tangled. Even smooth speech, even till now the sooth of the broadcast uncle, has fallen on barren ground. Communication in those valleys has been difficult, and unwelcome as often as not, since the coming of man and quite small domestic concerns and upsets will still produce an astonishingly wide electrified atmosphere. So too will other things not so easily defined. The mid-Welsh have remained Welsh, mysterious in their hollows (except for an odd changeling or so who might be outstanding in political or religious oratory or some other form of vocal excellence), throughout these industrious last two centuries in which the Irish have filled the world's ears with self-explanatory discourse, and the Scots, before its astonished eyes, have stolidly become possessed of its purse. They have even resisted the temptation to which most other mountain peoples of our age have lost no time in succumbing, the temptation to become a nation of hotel-keepers. It is not the least noticeable of their stubborn characteristics, indeed, that they have

remained very much the reverse, as the briefest visitor may testify unless he is lucky or accompanies our author. And meanwhile, their immediate English neighbours, perhaps in self-defence, have remained beyond parallel English.

And then, even more imposing to our contemporary minds, there is the meeting and confusion between the other social currents, between the old and the new, industrialism and agriculture, progress and conservatism, aristocrat and arrivist, a struggle present wherever man is but nowhere more manifest than here. Most manifest of all is the clash between money and manners, town intelligence and country breeding; which leaves strange and ominous contrasts, ambushed, outmoded, cast up on unlooked-for crags, like corpses in an Afghan valley after an expedition of the old school. For the towns, each according to its own traditions, spray out their amenities, like so many cancers spreading on a fair skin—or if another parallel be preferred, like so many congresses of angels of light. At any rate it is a queer kind of civilization—a drastic ichor—which is pulsing westward. One of the few village churches to be celebrated in song in all that country has been adorned, it is said, with a cross of neon; and we need not be surprised if we should hear that ‘consideration is being given’ by the local authorities ‘as to whether’ an adjacent hill might not be flood-lighted for the benefit of the poetically minded tourist.

This is how this particular reflection strikes from one facet of a many-sided mind:

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century and of Queen Victoria’s reign, the social geology of that corner of the Black Country which straddles the

county boundary of Worcester and Stafford began to show, under the volcanic stresses of industrialism, a confusion of faults, eruptions, distortions and subsidences as that of the rocky strata on which the land's physical shapes were moulded. Here and there, in shabby-genteel manor-houses and moated farms, isolated patches of the primary Mercian formation persisted, pitiful but unchanged, under the Saxon names of Abberley and Ombersley and Weir, whose owners had clung to their dwindling acres ever since King Offa gave his name to the great Dyke west of Severn, to the domed eminence of Uffdown, and to the wood beneath it. Later and less durable influences—such as those of the Marcher Lords, those Pomfrets and Powyses whose domination had made all Mercia Norman—had melted away like the Arenig glaciers, leaving no more than a stony castle-tump or an occasional archway cut with dog's-tooth carving to bear witness to their splendid impermanence, like those glacial boulders with which the Clents are strewn. There remained, it is true, in old market towns such as Halesby and Stourton, once gracious, now debauched by staring brick, a sort of breccia or conglomerate in which fragments of all the earlier formations might be found; but these broken strata had no continuity, so warped, so shattered, so overwhelmed were they by the eruption of underlying carboniferous rocks which the exploitation of the coal-measures had brought to the surface, changing the contours of the earth by mountainous elevations of pit-mounds and deposits of soot and cinders; modifying the social aspect of the countryside by thrusting into prominence such portents as the new industrial aristocracy families like the Willises of Mawne, a black sport from the Saxon Hacketts, or the Hingstons of Stourford, who came from God knows where.

No country could offer more opportunities to a writer with the epical turn of mind. Yet, since the note-taking passage of Michael Drayton neither verse nor prose of any majesty or permanence has commemorated any extensive part of this great tract. Great poets have been born within its boundaries, and many have inhabited there; but when they sang they have lifted their notes mystically up, beyond their local hill-tops; or if they have sung, as Vaughan sometimes did, of earth, it was not recognizably of this stretch of counties. Mr. A. E. Housman comes nearest to being its laureate; but his pendable lads might incur the displeasure of the judiciary equally, one feels, anywhere in Saxon England. In prose, since the Arthurian legends, there have been Giraldus Cambrensis and a few passages of the restless Borrow. And Miss Mary Webb poetized on its northern border in an English idiom, bred by Wardour Street out of the Wyle Cop, which some experienced readers appear to find not intolerable. The rest has been a true Worcester or Radnorshire silence. If the Welsh have sung indeed, as we are annually informed, it has been in gibberish to a cenance.

Perhaps it all seemed too good to be true, too various and too wide. Perhaps some additional feature was lacking, some continuous human element which should precipitate this amorphous mixture of manners and environments. At all events, such a symbolic stirring-rod was, as it happened, provided with the most pragmatism of intentions by the Corporation of Birmingham in the symbolic 'nineties.

For the present, at any rate, the city showed no sign of perishing. During the last year or two, its tentacles had spread farther than ever before,

swarming into the wet and lonely valley of the Dulas Fechan, a deep cleft in the mountains beyond Felindre where a noisy river ran through undergrowth older than man's memory. From this valley, the council had decreed, the rain of the Savaddan watershed, which geology had destined for the Wye and later for the Atlantic, must now traverse eighty miles or more of conquered territory, and after being defouled by the domestic usages of North Bromwich, must find its way into the Trent, and so to the German Ocean, as the Romans thoughtlessly labelled the North Sea. 'Water,' said the Mayor, who was also known as Sir Joseph Astill, the brewer, 'water is one of the necessities of life. It is our duty to the public to see that they have it, and that they have it pure and unadulterated.'*

In fact, in 1894, these City fathers, having obtained the necessary parliamentary consent two years before with some opposition from southern members, began an engineering scheme on a scale without precedent in these islands since the days of Imperial Rome. They had decided to form, for the water-supply of their citizens, three reservoirs in the Elan Valley and three in the valley of the Claerwen. Seventy-one square miles of midmost Wales were bought up. A model, or garden, village was erected on the south of the river Elan, near Caban Coch, with a system of lighting, sewerage and quarantine, with club-rooms, fire-brigades, sick-bays, doss-houses and eventually a municipal public-house, 'calculated' says the proud guide-book, 'to promote sobriety.' This promotion, as in the service of the Crown, was slow to occur. Great

* From *The Young Physician*. The prose in much of this book is early, earlier even than appears, for it was meditated among the first. Hence the ungainly memory of Coleridge and the apotheosis of geology.

hosts of inland navigators were recruited—without difficulty, since, as if to counteract the impending sobriety, the conditions of daylight in those sunken glades made the working day abnormally short. New tensions and an unheard-of cosmopolitanism were thus added artificially to that natural melting-pot.

A series of stupendous dams was undertaken, one 560 feet long, and one, submerged at Carreg Dhu, ingeniously devised to raise the height of the water in the eventual storage reservoir at Frankley, near Birmingham. The water, flowing at the rate of two miles an hour, was carried through thirteen miles of tunnel, twenty-three of 'cut and cover,' eight feet in diameter, and thirty-seven miles of iron pipes. The aqueducts run from Rhayader to Four Crosses, near Knighton, Ludlow, Cleobury Mortimer, through Wyre Forest, to Kidderminster, Stourbridge, Hagley and Frankley. They cross the Wye, the Ithon, the Teme three times, the Severn, the Stour, and innumerable mountain streams and torrents. An excellent feat for a small island; but the Mosul pipe-line runs for 600 miles, though not through such human country.

The microcosm was completed, and the supply declared open, on 21st July, 1904, by King Edward and Queen Alexandra*; and the fact if not the ceremony at which he was not present, crystallized the imagination of Francis Brett Young, just then about to enter the impressionable twenties, for good and all. All that country through which it passes had been his dream-country from earliest infancy, for it was all visible from the summit of Walton Hill (now immortalized as

* The Mayor of Birmingham was knighted on this occasion; but by some oversight, James Mansergh, the civil engineer, who had been insisting on the scheme for thirty years, and finally carried it through, was not singled out for civic honour.

‘Uffdown’) which almost, one might say, stands in the back-gardens of Hales Owen. The sweeping magnitude and the poetry of the thing, the nice balance of the contrasts, was, of course, its principle attraction, but municipal pride may well have helped, pride, particularly, in the decency and æsthetic care with which that modernist invasion into the mountains was carried out. Birmingham (‘North Bromwich’) itself was the centre of his first worldly experiences, for its heart is hardly seven miles from Hales Owen (‘Halesby’) where he was born and where his father practised; and at the time of the ceremonial opening he was taking his degrees at that seat of learning. We see a great deal of it in the novels—this pleasant, classical, arcaded city, where the unparalleled custom of purveying beer in gills enables the visitor to combine the maximum enjoyment of its hospitality with the maximum continuance of sobriety—and we learn a great deal about its inner workings. Some of the most stringent pressure recorded in the economic history of England, the Five Mile Act, drove to its shadow the best of the sturdiest nonconforming types in the country. These people and their descendants throng the mind of Mr. Brett Young.

And the Elan Valley, before the pipe-line was laid, was already not without its fascination for a boy with leanings towards poetry. Hardly a generation before, there had still been people living in those parts who could recall ‘a very strange gentleman,’ nice-looking, with his throat bare except on Sundays—‘him that put the five-pound note on the boat.’ That was higher up the valley and it was Shelley’s first sojourn amongst mountains; but the noble and resistless scheme had drowned, together with manors, churches and count-

less farms, the ghost-ridden Nantgwyllt farmhouse where Shelley ended his honeymoon with Harriet, and sent forth further fleets, less expensively rigged, in what was to be the good burgesses' water. Peacock met them there for the first time, in 1812, and hereabouts were imagined the prophetic songs and dances of *The Misfortunes of Elphin*. The house, of course, lies always at the back of *The House Under The Water*.

It has been calculated that the inundation saves the inhabitants of Birmingham £120,000 a year on their soap bills alone. . . . What it would have achieved in this matter for the stiff-necked and unforeseeing Londoners, who refused an offer to participate in the scheme, let astronomers decide!

We shall probably not be going far astray if we assume that since some date which may be set very early in the century, and in all probability long before 1904, Mr. Brett Young has never entirely ceased to think in terms of good solid symbols of the earth, geologically in detail and geographically in general. By the time of *Portrait of Clare* this geological idiom had become a fixed habit, and by now it may be traced in quite small gestures of thought. No man has ever more readily recurred to earthy or metallurgical metaphors. The proclivity will be noticed again and again as we proceed (we have seen it already, as a matter of fact), but one example of its very deliberate use will not be out of place here:

Between them they essayed this monstrous lustration. Jonathan took off his coat and Rachel rolled up the sleeves of her dark blouse. They worked like two children, making a game of it, collecting the alluvium of unopened samples that post after post had deposited in out of the way corners; the

drifts of papers, circulars, moneylenders' letters, messages that had once been urgent; unopened medical periodicals . . . and even, embedded in the nascent conglomerate, two cheques from patients, forgotten and unresented.

When they had thrust this documentary silt into the stove and sent it roaring up to set the chimney on fire, the more solid elements of the formation became visible; stained bottles and test-tubes, covered with dust, from which the contents had evaporated, leaving nothing but a rim of crystals, corroded pen-nibs. . . .

And so on and so forth, still cropping out for pages, the geological parallels methodically but most imaginatively carried on.

Later, but probably not much later, came for our everlasting delectation the intending novelist's eye ranging hydroptically up and down the pipe-line. It drew him incessantly upon his bicycle and on foot, and in his courting days he was accompanied in exploration. Some of the most romantic country in England seemed to gain magically from its steady threading and curious outcroppings in aqueducts and discreet red valve-houses. Bewdley, with its elegant air of old-world commerce; twin Arley of the ferry; crude Knighton, always a disappointment to Housmanites; Brampton Bryan with its all-important fair; and the still unspoiled Forest of Wyre—every inch of the way became familiar.

Later still there was a summer bungalow in the Elan Valley itself, and expeditions were made in time of drought to peer down through the sunlit subaqueous twilight in the sunken garden of Nant-gwylt farmhouse: a curiously valid symbol of the

career of Shelley—and of Harriet. Much water flowed under and over and in to Birmingham whilst these things were brewing ; perhaps it needed the yeast of war finally to ferment them. But however that may be, the result of it all is that the apportionment of these Mercian counties to Mr. Brett Young, whether we approve or not, must rank in the eyes of posterity as naturally as the awarding of Wessex to Hardy, of the sweeter, saner parts of India and other colonies, settlements and mandated territories to Mr. Rudyard Kipling, Scotland to Scott and Stevenson, Faerie to Sir James Barrie, or to our most ticklish newcomer, the night-club novelist, those cheerful purlieus of Soho which he has made peculiarly his own.

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IV

THE DOCTOR IN LITERATURE

AN attempt to classify writers according to the trades or professions which first engaged their youth and supported their reluctant idleness, or even those which they may have been forced to select in full career to compensate for default of audience, would probably contribute little to science, although it would certainly provide a great many grotesque self-contradictions, and a vast number of indictments of the social order. Thus, one would discover among the shop-men not only Mr. Wells, who left the haberdashery as a cat leaves hot bricks, but the agile Mr. James Agate and the protean Mr. Robert Graves adopting, of mature deliberation, the grocery business. The clergy would be found excelling in a pawky humour. Lawyers would be found to write an unfair proportion of the more sentimental and better selling kinds of novel, usually not with the logical address which ought to be expected of them; and professional soldiers and sailors (as distinct from lettered citizens, temporarily enlisted) would reveal themselves as surprisingly vocal in a valiant have-at-you spirit, especially in reminiscence. But one would not often discover that any particular calling elected to express itself with any exceptional degree of consistency in any particular manner or form.

There are signs, however, that one would find points of significance in the activities of doctors of medicine: that they write less in proportion than the

members of the less altruistic professions, apart from a mutual serenading in their technical papers, but that the proportion of poets to prose-writers (or, to prepare a distinction, let us say 'prose-thinkers') is considerably higher among them than in any other well-defined walk of life. The discerning eye of Sir Edmund Gosse duly remarked the phenomenon:

Something very subtle links the practice of literature to the profession of medicine. What it is I cannot tell but the fact subsists that if you see a surgeon or a physician meditating alone, there are ten chances that he is busy composing a sonnet to one chance that an engineer or a brewer is doing the same. . . .

but the reasons for it escaped his decorous enquiry. These oversights will occur; and Gosse was addicted more to observation than to ratiocination.

The trained minuteness of garlanded critical authority (and indeed of all who aspire to this insolent business of criticism) tends to overlook the one plain fact of poetry: that the poet is not on his side also an authoritative specialist, but only a full-blooded human-being who is intensely aware. He is, of course, not even necessarily a person with the habit of writing in rhymed stanzas. Most of the people who do that are notoriously not poets. Poetry in essence is like electricity, not a thing but a way of reacting. Every man who is greatly in love with life, conscious of some sort of reality and not too full of pre-conceived opinions, is a potential poet. Provided that his education has been conducted so that he is not unfamiliar with the uses of language, he has but to speak his mind. In the degree to which he is avid of

human experience, every man is eager to impart form to its unmanageable chaos and to transpose its cacophonous undertones into a personal rhythm, if not a personal music: to contribute, at the least, a commentary if not a rendering.

Now, the profession of medicine is the only profession which remains a vocation. It is hedged around at the outset with physical unpleasantness and a vigorous selection, it lacks at every stage the support of rule of thumb routine, and it is precisely to the ambitious amateurs of life, and to these alone, that it appeals. 'Whence come all worthy doctors,' asked Robert Louis Stevenson, 'and whither go all riotous medical students?' The question is rhetorical and needs no answer. Also its implications are decidedly unfair. It is certain that medical students come from the cream of humanity, from among the most humane and most vital, if therefore not unnaturally from the most lively, of God's creatures. Without the passionate deep desire for intimate human experience, without an imperious urge to come at the springs of conduct, coupled with the highest seriousness, without in fact the poetical diathesis, all ready for infection, it is inconceivable that any vigorous and imaginative young man would undertake to conquer a swarm of innate repugnances and to grind at monotonous and occasionally squalid studies for an uncommonly extended number of years, all to enter a profession in which the hours and worries are the worst in the world, and the average remuneration is less than that which, as we are told, rewards the condescending exertions of the motor-car salesman.

Doctors keep professional pride well hidden; but intimations of their mission come sometimes to students.

'He (Francis Thompson) never qualified,' said Boyce dreamily, 'and yet medicine is a wonderful thing. I should think that the medical man is always face to face with mortality'—he pointed to a suspended skeleton in the corner—'and all the other big fundamental things like birth and pain, ought to give him a sort of sense of proportion and make him sensitive to the beauties of life. Your friend, Sir Thomas Browne, is an example. Then there's Rabelais.'

'There are heaps of others,' said Edwin.

'Well, yes . . . Keats.'

'Byron and Akenside,' Edwin supplied from the eighteenth century.

'I don't know the gentleman,' said Boyce.

'Well, then, Goldsmith and Crabbe. Crabbe's rather good, you know. And Shelley——'

'Shelley?'

'Yes, Shelley walked a hospital when he was in London with Harriet.'

The collaboration of eager youth (a beautiful study in callowness, by the way, with its general air of silly solemnity, its lovely *non-sequitur*, its pointing to skeletons and its quite exemplary inaccuracy) fails by a long chalk to exhaust the list. They might have instanced Henry Vaughan, Erasmus Darwin, Samuel Garth, Sir Richard Blackmore, Grainger ('say shall I sing of rats?') Thomas Lodge, Mandeville and Thomas Lovel Beddoes among their full-blown doctors, and Coleridge, Southey, at a stretch Flaubert, and probably Massinger, among their students. Bridges, they go on to mention; and Dr. Gertrude Stein's verbalness broke first upon the world long after their time. They have only the slenderest right to Crabbe, who

practised in a very quackish way and for a very little while; and Shelley came no nearer to the study of medicine in London than he came to the practice of navigation in the Elan Valley. There is only one wild remark by an acquaintance to suggest that he ever entered a hospital. Nevertheless the studious young have the gist of the matter.

A good doctor is a poet in his heart, however mute his tongue may be. And, although the busiest of men, he has usually spare energy enough to act, if not the verbal trick to write, like one. He lives a life of untrammelled intuition. He is encouraged, for example, to dramatize his diagnoses; his bedside manner is, and ought to be, a finished piece of persuasion; and it is a common observation (take for instance almost any doctor of years and standing from almost any piece of observant fiction, or study him in one of the prevalent medical semi-autobiographies) that he is peculiarly liable to behave at most times, and in all places, with the excess of naturalness of character which passes in the world as eccentricity, for the reason (one can only presume) that it is so entirely central. Even when he has the added gift to be articulate, to sublimate as the fashion is to put it, he may still be found exhibiting the fires of the artistic temperament. I have heard it said that Dr. Robert Bridges acted with the most astonishing naturalness at times, particularly in the impending presence of interviewers or adorers; while Dr. Beddoes in his published work never revealed his fantastic subtlety of spirit half so well as when, upon learning that some friends intended to divert him at the Drury Lane Theatre, he attempted to ignite that edifice with a five-pound note. These larger units of paper money

seem to have lain more readily to the hands of poets in the early nineteenth century than now; yet even the most articulate and least impecunious amongst the youngest of physicians must surely look upon that *magnum opus* with envy and despair!

We shall not discover any trait so engaging as that in the life or works of Mr. Francis Brett Young. He sublimates too rapidly. Our true eccentrics are costive writers. He has produced twenty-one novels and a great deal of miscellaneous writing before fifty. His fire is under control. But the fires of his doctors have a singular glint. This is the oldest doctor from *The Young Physician* which, needless to say, is a well-stocked treasury of doctors:

. . . Sometimes he would come home with a small insect of some kind in a pillbox and arrange it under the microscope on the table under the dispensary window; and he'd say: 'Wonderful . . . wonderful!' not because he'd made any biological observations, but just because it revealed a lot of unsuspected detail.

It was a favourite trick of his to show his patients a sample of their own blood corpuscles under the microscope too. 'There they are,' he'd say, 'like a pile of golden guineas, and if you had a millionth part as many guineas as you have of these in your body, you'd be the richest man in England.'

and here is a still older doctor from *Portrait of Clare*. Clare has undertaken to read aloud to him; and is rumoured to cherish Popish practices:

. . . As a whimsical penance for Clare's heterodoxy, it now amused him to inflict on her, in the intervals between pages of *The Financial Times*, the

reading of those old destructive sceptical writings which had inspired his youth, and a new book which curiously fitted the occasion. It was called *The Secret Records of the Oxford Movement*, a spirited and occasionally lubricious attack on the activities of Mr. Darney's kind.

Clare read this exposure aloud from cover to cover. The old man spared her nothing. She read of the scandalous indecencies of the confessional, the lusts of celibate priests, the enormities practised in the convents of Protestant sisterhoods. The doctor grunted over them and licked his lips; for they confirmed his theory that all mystical religions were nothing but manifestations of sexual suppressions. Aunt Cathie sat listening in her chair and blushed. This torture, if torture it was meant to be, recoiled upon her, its instigator, rather than on Clare. For Clare did not understand.

Notice, quite by the way, how everybody in the room is lighted by a contributory flash. These are two random instances from a large and most attractive gallery of medical portraits, upon which there will be occasion to draw further.

It is the fusing heat, the fire (an awkward metaphor, but I hope to justify it), the burning synthesis, that completes the poet. We may take, if we dare, for comparison and contrast another, and an exceptional, doctor in letters, Mr. Somerset Maugham, to whom the gods, in giving much, have either in a fit of unorthodoxy denied, or else from whom they have at some time retracted, that crowning gift. Mr. Maugham can tell a story against anyone in the world. His descriptive powers are extraordinarily efficient, as indeed are all his powers. He can make a tropical forest thrill with sinister noises and

a crescendo of subdued threats. Planters and their visitors burst under his hands into exotic jealousies and panic fears with all the elegance of orchids flowering. But he is a sorcerer and not a creator. The magic will only unfold under his supervision, while he is present, exerting the whole of his power; and when he has ceased to cast his spells, the forests and their denizens fade out of the reader's mind. There has been no larger synthesis. The conjured powers have got clean away. Pan's influence has flickered out and the god and his train are in flight, irretrievable except by new conjuration, in a further jungle.

By those critics who observe that Mr. Maugham does not possess the highest degree of inventiveness, he has been accused of cruelty in his dealings with simple fellow-creatures, but that is unjust. He is a strong man with a genius for story-telling, whose interests are analytical. He sees men as cases walking and not as victims of a general disorder. Diagnosis is more in his line than prognosis; but it is treatment that enthalls him. His work done, he resigns the case. I should say that he is the surgeon incarnate, serenely confident of his delicate dexterity, whose instinct it is to make exploratory incisions where he cannot make compelling alternative gestures. There is about him, indeed, more than a trace of the vivisector. Nobody, one feels, has the right to know animal human-nature quite so thoroughly inside and out as he does, or to have a knack so unflinching of reducing it to its simplest or lowest terms.

It is the art of the poet, on the other hand, as of the physician, to illuminate rather the highest common denominator than the lowest common multiple, to relate his cases to an upward synthesis, to regard

individuals first and last in the light of broad generalizations: to see them from inside, and radiate outwards. Mr. Brett Young's Godovius, a character in *The Crescent Moon*, an early and not a very typical book, does not come to life on the page with anything like the intensity of Mr. Maugham's smallest sodden clubman. His significance only begins to take shape when the reader has finished the story. Mr. Maugham allays the mind with his fascinating manipulations and when the operation is over, and the book shut, one cares little what has happened to the patients. They have been in good hands and doubtless everything relevant has been done for them. Mr. Brett Young at the end of his story has left his people on our consciences. His books have an aftertaste; that it is that first distinguishes them for most new readers. For let us be quite frank in this matter, at the risk of being platitudinous. A work of art may be too well finished. It is often a part of artistry to leave stray ends. Cleverness, slickness, in a novelist, or in any artist, is not always enough if he is to make a definite contribution to life. Or, rather, one may say that it is too much.

It is possible to overlay the Muse. Corot's custom was to stop painting after nine on summer mornings, when the mists began to disperse. 'Everything can be seen now,' he would say, 'so there's nothing to see.' Minute accuracies are well enough in the absence of genius, but serve only to limit the true afflatus. The old familiar parable may as well see the light of day again: a sketch drawn in ten lines, or perhaps in five hundred, by a master, will outlive a library of photographs. And the mastery lies in a deft appeal to the common denominator of humanity, in knowing how far to leave his effects to that part of his

vision which the audience shares with him and may be trusted to entertain with a gusto of their own.

And then there is always the question of roughage. The mental digestion is not less exigent than the physical.

But enough of apology *in vacuo*. Let us proceed to demonstration.

*

V

POETRY AND PROSE

IN order to drive home naked as it were and shamelessly this point with the paradoxical air about the unvarying poetical attitude of Mr. Brett Young, writer of novels, while yet preserving a possible illusory critical order, I have withheld the fact, unknown it seems to nearly all his newer readers, that he published a volume of poetry immediately after the War. It is high time that these admirable verses were produced in evidence, as it is high time that they were reprinted.

They are occupied with love, with old cities, with trees and birds and flowers, with war experience, with the beauty of England and of English words (as the verses of soldier-poets usually were at that time) and also, and this was less usual, with beauty in the abstract, —Beauty, the shining symbol,—which noble and unattainable theme they assail as gallantly and as successfully in their smaller number as do the shorter poems of Robert Bridges. Of that success when it came to be taken up on a larger scale there will be a great deal more to say. They are intensely personal poems, moving to a private music, providing little food for thought although a great deal for intuitive perception, and indulging in very little deliberate technical experiment. Some of them are obviously mere exercises in the modes of other writers and some, as obviously, are unamended jottings pumped-up by a deliberating metrician; so that we may

assume from the fact that in this book of ninety pages we find all the gradations between crudity and perfection of utterance, that the collection contains all the pieces, including the earliest and most occasional, that Mr. Brett Young had written. Some of them are masterpieces in their kind: this is *Prothalamion*:

When the evening came my love said to me:
Let us go into the garden now that the sky is cool,
The garden of black hellebore and rosemary,
Where wild woodruff spills in a milky pool.

Low we passed in the twilight, for the wavering heat
Of day had waned, and round that shaded plot
Of secret beauty, the thickets clustered sweet:
Here is heaven, our hearts whispered, but our lips
spake not.

Between that old garden and seas of lazy foam
Gloomy and beautiful alleys of trees arise
With spire of cypress and dreamy beechen dome,
So dark that our enchanted sight knew nothing
but the skies

Veiled with soft air, drench'd with roses' musk
Or the dusky, dark carnations' breath of clove;
No stars burned in their deeps, but through the dusk
I saw my love's eyes, and they were brimmed with
love.

No star their secret ravished, no wasting moon
Mocked the sad transience of those eternal hours:
Only the soft, unseeing heaven of June,
The ghosts of great trees, and the sleeping flowers.

For doves that crooned in the leafy noonday now
Were silent; the night-jar sought his secret covers,
Nor even a mild sea-whisper moved a creaking
bough—

Was ever a silence deeper made for lovers?

Was ever a moment meeter made for love?

Beautiful are your closed lips beneath my kiss;
And all your yielding sweetness beautiful—

Oh, never in all the world was such a night as this.

That is anodyne and not stimulant; music, not meaning; a gracious zephyr of full summer, not a growing wind. It will not be entirely to the contemporary taste; and I will intrude my own prejudices, being a convenient post-war specimen, so far as to admit that it is no longer much to mine. Unlike many of my contemporaries, however, I take no credit for that incidental of middle-age in myself and of senility in the world. We have most of us come to prefer, many of us against our instincts, that verse should chatter to our intellectual parts, and charm the emotions, when indeed, it deigns at all to serenade the servants, only just long enough to receive right of entrance, if the phrase may be allowable, to those austere organs. We are prepared to meet the longer compositions halfway, since size still impresses us, but hardly these brief imprecise lyrical measures. We stand on our somewhat dyspeptic dignities, and are not to be moved abruptly except by the utmost stringency. Catharsis is no longer all our joy. But *Prothalamion* is perfect of its kind providing the long breath of passion, utterly subsumed, which George Meredith brought off sometimes magnificently and Robert Bridges often, though rarely so ecstatically as this.

Fortunately one may recognize a beauty without wishing to live with it—even while quietly resenting it. The most sunken and desiccated contrapuntist that ever reluctantly accepted a ticket is said to have been rapt away by Pachmann's playing of Chopin, and to have sworn that it should never happen again. As idle as the quarrel between the mind and the heart is debate over romantic and classic art, as dangerous and as absurd. Rather than enter it let me quote another of these long exhalations, *Invocation*, a poem in something of the same manner but perhaps a little less derivative in tone, and more to our post-modernist tastes; although less successful as a whole poem:

Whither, O, my sweet mistress, must I follow thee?
For when I hear thy distant footfall nearing,
And wait on thy appearing,
Lo, my lips are silent: no words come to me.

Once I waylaid thee in green forest covers,
Hoping that spring might free my lips with gentle
fingers;
Alas! her presence lingers
No longer than on the plain the shadow of brown
kestrel hovers.

Through windless ways of the night my spirit fol-
lowed after:
Cold and remote were they, and there, possessed
By a strange unworldly rest,
Awaiting thy still voice heard only starry laughter.

The pillared halls of sleep echoed my ghostly tread.
Yet when their secret chambers I essayed
My spirit sank dismayed,
Waking in fear to find the new-born vision fled.

Once indeed—but then my spirit bloomed in leafy
rapture—

I loved; and once I looked death in the eyes:
So, suddenly made wise,
Spoke of such beauty as I may never recapture. . .

Whither, O, divine mistress, must I then follow thee?

Is it only in love . . . say, is it only in death
That the spirit blossometh,
And words that may match my visions shall come to me?

That is clearly an improvisation. It might be regarded as the rough note of a vision, emotionally extensive, intended as the nucleus of a considerable poem. Perhaps it was. Compared with *Prothalamion* its expression is hurried and thoughtless. Nevertheless, one undebatable point may be made: not many men have been admitted to write poetry at this white heat who have afterwards abandoned the exercise entirely for other occupations. That sort of flooding eagerness is a dedication, a very accompaniment of the rhythm of being and as natural as a sigh. But notice the agony of the love for beauty in words—even for the difficult, question-begging word 'Beauty.' It is at greater or less distance a motif of all these poems. Let me quote, once more at length, a poem called *The Rain-bird*:

High on the tufted baobab-tree
To-night a rain-bird sang to me
A simple song, of three notes only,
That made the wilderness more lonely;

For in my brain it echoed nearly
Old village church bells chiming clearly:
The sweet cracked bells, just out of tune,
Over the mowing grass in June—

Over the mowing grass, and meadows
Where the low sun casts long shadows,
And cuckoos call in the twilight
From elm to elm in level flight.

Now through the evening meadows move
Slow couples of young folk in love,
Who pause at every crooked stile
And kiss in the hawthorn's shade the while:

Like pale moths the summer frocks
Hover between the beds of phlox,
And old men, feeling it is late,
Cease their gossip at the gate,

Till deeper still the twilight grows,
And night blossometh like a rose
Full of love and sweet perfume,
Whose heart most tender stars illumine.

Here the red sun sank like lead,
And the sky blackened overhead;
Only the locust chirped at me
From the shadowy baobab-tree.

This, the report of an observed experience rather than an experience felt intuitively, lacks the flooding ecstasy of our other examples, but still is valuable in its more occasional kind. It moves well although at moments, especially in the penultimate verse, it is plainer than ever that the poet's love for words is only coyly reciprocated. Later, under more settled conditions, it was to be returned in full measure. But now take this:

A rain-bird near me sang its simple song of three descending notes in the diatonic scale, thin and very

sweet, repeated many times. There were lots of things in music of which this song might have reminded me in its soft repetitions; but what it brought to my mind most clearly was the sweet, cracked bells of a village church, a little out of tune (as was the rain-bird itself); not indeed of any village that I know, but of a dream village which I am sure I shall find some day, for I shall know it anywhere.

Is not that a distinct improvement, more appealing to the imagination, more rhythmical in its musing undertone, more poetical, in a word? It is the prose report of the same observation from *Marching on Tanga*.

In fact this poetry is not of the verbal sort. It approaches, hesitantly, to the condition of romantic music on the level of Mendelssohn or Grieg, excellent romantic musicians of the second rank, whom it is the silly fashion to despise. There are no jewels eight beats long in it. The unit is the phrase, and the phrase at length—or even, as it were, the pulse of the idea—not mere happy conjunction of epithet and noun. ‘Bright is the ring of words,’ notes Robert Louis Stevenson, once again, ‘when the right man rings them.’ In applauding that measured truism we should not forget that there exists also a bright phrasical music. Let me illustrate with a pair of brief descriptive passages from a book taken at random, *My Brother Jonathan*:

... Black hair, not dead, but with the life of copper in it.

The effect there is centred in the metallic word and is wholly verbal. This rapid usage is not of course so very rare in the work of Mr. Brett Young, he is far too

fine and conscious and careful a writer to ignore, if not to forgo, any effect of words; but it is outnumbered by descriptions which are composed by the slow but no less vivid accumulation of the components of the idea:

... He found Dr. Lucas still in his bedroom slippers, a picture of resignation and humility. He was a pale, plump, middle-aged man, whose voice and manner, both surprisingly cultivated, were as soft as his pallid, flabby tissues. His skin, his scanty hair and ragged moustache were yellowish white, like old ivory; their texture had the transparency of bleached vegetables sprouting in a cellar, the consistency of soft and fungoid growths.

The vivifying flash comes at last, it will be observed, but it is not a flash of words. Indeed one feels that the words are almost carelessly chosen, that they are of secondary importance. The unit is the idea.

But to return to the verses. One would have concluded that the avoidance of outstanding adjective and hard receptive noun in verse so excellently written otherwise, must necessarily be deliberate, even if the point were not debated in full in the critical study of the poems of Robert Bridges which, meditated in company with his brother Eric in a deep Welsh valley—indeed in the house (the inn in the ruins of Llanthony Abbey) which was to take shape as Alaric's *Dark Tower*—was really Mr. Brett Young's very first book:

It is one of the signs, I think, of the great poet that he is fearless in using the obvious epithet where it will serve a coherent picture, as it is of the small one that, in those very conditions, he abandons it to grope for the exalting phrase. True, the adjective

is only a poetic tradition, a legacy of the Augustans and—if it were not for the exalted sense of the obvious that I have mentioned—more severe art would banish the common epithet altogether. But few poets have used it so freely or effectively as Bridges for the sake of its mosaic value in a complex scheme.

Indeed, in the finer efforts of landscape it tends to disappear.

That is excellent criticism, although it is dictated by one of the gravest fears of youth, the fear of the adjective, a part of speech which youth, exuberantly and properly, tends to employ too much. The most admired virtue of the adjective is, of course, its tremendous powers of conciseness, and it is very easy to strike it out injudiciously, whatever the copy-books may say. Unlearned and excited writers may produce remarkably fine effects with no other implement:

To note on hedgerow baulks, in moisture sprent,
The jetty snail creep from the mossy thorn,
With earnest heed, and tremulous intent,
Frail brother of the morn,
That from the tiny bent's dew-moisted leaves
Withdraws his timid horn,
And fearful vision weaves.

So marvellously lightly moves that verse that one has to pinch oneself to notice how only two out of thirteen nouns are without their adjective; and again, to realize that it is upon its adjectives that it moves. So the simple John Clare.

But the compactness of the adjective did not excite the fancy of our author in those days, and would hardly attract him now. Copy-book compilers of the

future might well draw upon him in this matter. Few writers of his stature have written more simply or avoided more easily the easy epigrammatic indulgence; and even now, whenever he condescends to produce an epigram it is the result of the frictions of moral tone, as a rule, against an exhalation of accustomed phrase, and altogether lacks verbal significance. Thus:

That Julian should have been born with a golden spoon in his mouth was unimportant compared with the fact that he was bred with a Gainsborough in the nursery;

and again:

‘Poor Lady Elizabeth!’ Marcus Hinton murmured. ‘She’s reached the stage when a box at the opera suits her.’

It might seem at first sight that he had formed his lyrical note completely on Bridges’ model—wide-embracing outlines with plenty of space between the words. Influenced he certainly has been.* The craftsmanship is very similar. What might be called the voice-production is not dissimilar. But the backgrounds of emotion are very different. Here is manifest all the famous divergence between classic and romantic. A spreading ecstasy is ever-present in Mr. Brett Young’s attitude to life; and in Bridges, as he points out, in spite of the glorious verbal, or rather vowel, flood in such things as ‘Wanton with long delay the gay

* Mr. Brett Young’s own view is that he was most influenced by the poems of Shenstone, but I find it impossible to read any evidences at all of eighteenth-century influence into either his verse or his prose. The eighteenth-century poets, and particularly Shenstone, who lived at Hales Owen, were his chief fuel as a boy; and he still remembers the flame of that conflagration. I do not see how it is possible to argue beyond that point.

spring leaping cometh,' as fervid on the surface as the *Pervergilium*, true ecstasy is lacking, or is overlaid by a too anxious care for the versification :

Perhaps it is an adventure not lightly to be made in verse. It means either complete failure, or something that is only the shadow of success. Coleridge tried it, as if casually, and succeeded more often than he failed. Francis Thompson tried it, passionately, and failed more often than he succeeded. Possibly it is dangerous, this tracking of the 'nude unutterable thought.' Bridges rarely attempts to pierce to the mysterious heart of things. His genius is reflective rather than intuitive. His first concern is with beauty—not the beauty of form and movement only, but of the ideas and states of mind to which they give birth. When he has given us this he is content. He does not try to unveil the mystery of terror which is always to some extent present in the pathos we find in anything beautiful. He is happy to show us Nature in her robe of beauty and joy, without these sudden intuitions.

That, I think, is true enough. Bridges' fires were platonic; he submitted 'the shadows of things to the desires of the mind.' And here we have a logical, and again I think a just, conclusion :

.... English nature-poetry, from Chaucer to Tennyson, has given us little that is really nature. It has not been the normal method of our poets to subdue their vision to the pale tones of an English landscape. Whether we refer it to the racial love of wandering or to some warm Iberian strain in our blood, the tendency is not to be overlooked. Keats' longing for a beaker full of the warm south colours all his natural description, which is the most imaginative and least actual in the language. 'Nature was

related to him' in Bridges' own phrase, 'as an enchantress to a dreamer.' He found less enchantment in the earth itself than in the dreams with which he embroidered it. Shelley, with more delicate apprehension of colour and movement, brings the same transfusing warmth of imagination. In Wordsworth himself a quiet rural England inspired little but moral sentiments. His brain was haunted by mountains and cataracts, and he passed by the trim beauty of the countryside.

This is a hearty corrective to the blab and gush of the hiker-critic. Happily, even now that he is settled among his lands, Mr. Brett Young allows himself, from time to time, to proffer some such strict antidote.

The vision of England has been always with us, but it has been too cold to supply its own inspiration. When the fairies were banished from the land, her woods and rivers had to be peopled with legions of nymphs and hamadryads. The ecstasies glimpses of England in *Comus* and *L'Allegro*, the green hillocks, the hedgerow elms, the 'meadows trim with daisies pied,' are not complete till *Corydon* and *Thyrsis* strut on between the oaks. Pope—a true lover of nature, as I suspect were many of his maligned contemporaries—made of the Thames valley a great garden.

Bridges declares boldly that meadows, rivers, trees, woods and the commonplaces of nature are their own justification. They are the accepted materials of his verse. He handles them fearlessly in all their half-tints and subtle variations.

Did the young critic realize then how often he was to throw the rays of his own imagination over this same landscape, and how well he was to keep that implied pledge?

VI

THEMES AND MOTIFS

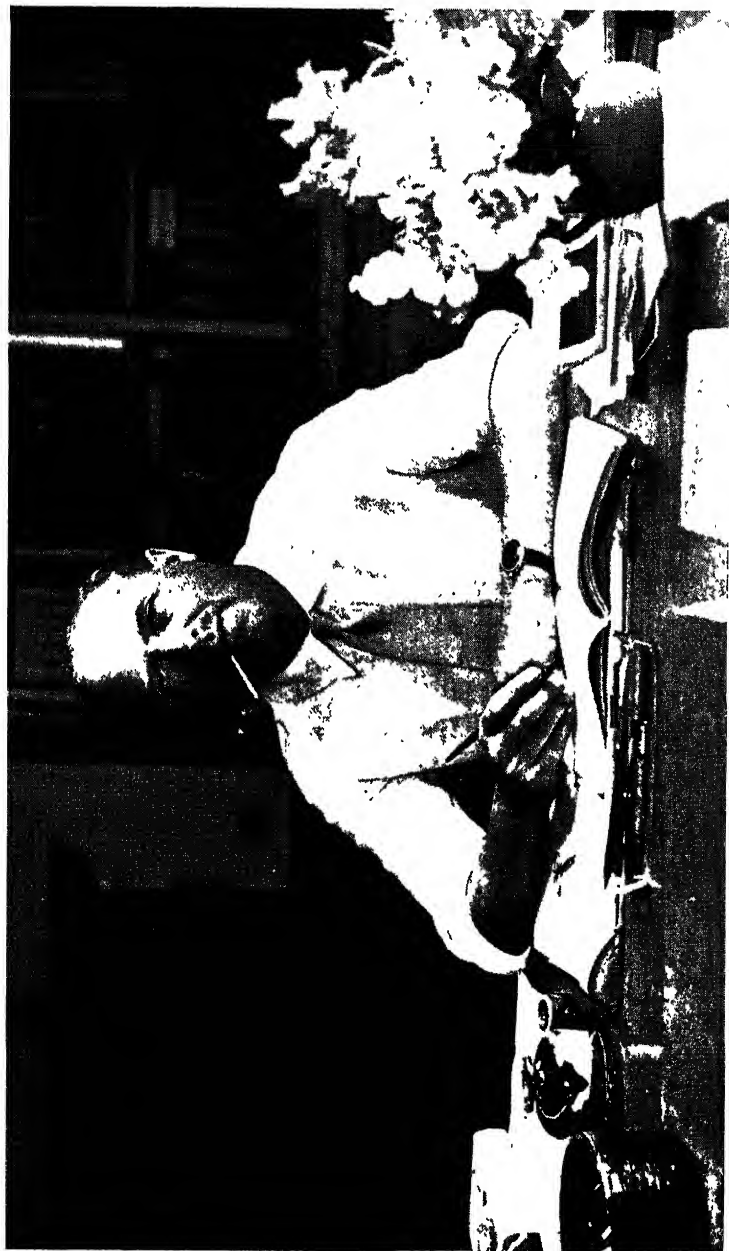
MR. BRETT YOUNG hardly depends at all upon other men, and quotes little. Certainly he dazzles us with fewer gems in his chapter headings and titles* than most modern novelists; but he never tires of repeating phrases from one passage in the third century of *The Meditations* of Thomas Traherne. In this repetition there is nothing of the flaunting vanity which we know so well. The quotation comes from one of the finest passages of sustained and ethereal prose in the language; but it is not entirely for its verbal music that he uses it:

The corn was orient and immortal wheat which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees, when I saw them first through one of the gates, transported and ravished me; their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O, what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubim! And young men glittering and sparkling angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling

* He undergoes agonies of choice, nevertheless, and the work usually comes out under the style which happens to be the last favourite. Thus *The Tragic Bride* was at the first stage intended to be called *The Miracle of Arthur Payne*, and had at least two other names.

in the street were morning jewels; I knew not that they were born or should die. But all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the Light of the Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared, which talked with my expectation and moved my desire. The City seemed to stand in Eden or to be built in Heaven. The streets were mine, the temple was mine, the people were mine, their clothes and gold and silver were mine, as much as their sparkling eyes, fair skins and ruddy faces. The skies were mine, and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the world was mine; and I the only spectator and enjoyer of it. . . . I knew no churlish proprieties, nor bounds nor division, but all proprieties and divisions were mine, all treasures and the possessors of them. So that with much ado I was corrupted, and made to learn the dirty devices of the world. . . .

All the work of Mr. Brett Young may be read in the light of that radiant fragment of vision. He is not concerned with Life for Life's sake. His interest is concentrated much more closely. His powers are ranged inalienably beside the Absolute Beauty (and continually define the indefinable phrase) in what he is disposed to feel is the last battle of her long campaign with the 'dirty devices of the world'; and his books report typical incidents from the fighting. It is an ironical and an interrogating as well as a tragical mood, and one not at all unlike the mood which prevails in the novels of Hardy, who also seems to set up instances of Beauty in order that they may be brought low by the buffets of existence. But Hardy opposed his puppets to forces outside their perception and of an unusual if an intermittent malignancy, in a



FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG IN HIS STUDY

kind of guerilla warfare waged by the stars. Jude and Tess suffer the lightnings of a shambling imminence fitfully irresistible, and in so far as they are made beautiful it is only for the reason, deliberately Aristotelian, that their tragedies are heightened by that means. Mr. E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, indicates an exact dividing-line:

Hardy seems to me essentially a poet, who conceives of his novels from an immense height. They are to be tragedies, or tragi-comedies, they are to give out the sound of hammer-strokes as they proceed; in other words Hardy arranges events with emphasis on causality, the ground plan is a plot, and the characters are ordered to acquiesce in its regimentation. The fate above us, not the fate working through us—that is what is eminent and memorable in the Wessex novels.

Mr. Brett Young's people, on the other hand, Gabrielle Hewish, Abner Fellows, Clare and the rest, incur their misfortunes by frequenting, too sedulously, everyday human situations. Their beauty, or (may we say) their beautiful truth, it is that brings them to nothing; they are not visited by meteors or thunderbolts, they simply cannot flourish in ordinary air. But in this ordinary air, while they occupy it, they are at least free to move unregimented.

This is the mood of a lyric poet, and yet one that is too consistent and explicit to be at ease in the glow and flicker of lyric poetry. When the dirty devices encamp with their followers in the mind, amidst innocent sunlight and greenery, they rouse heavier music. So Mr. Brett Young, neglecting experiment in verse beyond the amount that is decent and due in a

young man of intelligence, took at once to writing novels which should be shadow-plays, enacting select episodes from his private mythology. And the choice was not wholly subconscious.

Although he was temperamentally embarrassed with all the ingenuousness proper to the lyric poet, and quite without the novelist's proper cunning, he fitted himself out to attain the earthy eminences of prose fiction with extraordinary ease and speed. It is required of a poet in such circumstances that he should subdue his tingling apprehension, rein in his capacity for facile excitement and depend upon the suspect vigour of the mind. To these necessary preparations he attended gamely; indeed it is those two bravest virtues of his necessity which were doggedly misunderstood for so many years by reviewers, the one, mistaken for a wavering will-o'-the-wisp of promise, the other, for a disqualifying technical inability. His lyric poetry was not foreseen before the war, and was neglected after. His vivid embodiments of 'the dirty devices' were supposed to be the adolescent excesses of a born realist; and the curious uncertain light which hovers in the early novels was supposed either to arise from a decay of the formulating power or else to be the refraction from a flaw in vision.

There was a grain of truth in these suppositions, as we shall see. Nevertheless, the intermittence of the lighting was a deliberate effect, designed to cast a haze of apotheosis over whoever stands for Beauty in the argument and yet at the same time to reveal sharply and uninvitingly the people and things which enact her opponents. This masterful control of the lighting never relaxes, although, with increased experience, the patchwork of its moving flares and shadows

becomes less noticeable—inevitably, in all likelihood, but somewhat, one feels, to the loss of mystery. The quality of darkness, which is the supreme triumph of the handling of light, is never produced so perfectly again as in *The Dark Tower*, not even when the Black Country is brought on the scene. But this is only negative evidence.

Some other desirable ingredients for the full-length novel he was slower to find. For some years, down to *The Tragic Bride*, he was, in common I think with most novelists who are moved by a primary lyrical impulse, a little wooden in his stage appliances, a little over-cunning in contrivance. *The Young Physician*, which is a happy hunting-ground for the deprecatory critic, is full of instances of this. Edwin Ingleby, just after his mother's death, is being lectured about 'due reverence' by his aunt:

Edwin burst out laughing. It was no good arguing with the woman. He gave a despairing glance at his father. Was it possible that the man could listen seriously to superficial cant of this kind? Was it possible that he could tolerate the woman's presence in the house? He looked, and he saw nothing but tiredness and desolation in the man's face. He saw that in reality his father was too tired for anything but compromise.

It is, in itself, a weary passage, but, with all allowances made, it cannot be forgiven for its slipshod mental rhetoric. The word 'woman' may perhaps be defended in that context, but 'man' is inexcusable. So far as Edwin is using these words at all he is using only their echoes in his mind; and 'man' under those conditions would be insufferably ironical. The re-entry of

'father,' the return to the familiar, is also awkwardly done. As an attempt to arrive with some precision at Edwin's impatient, tired and unfamiliar thought, the passage is unsuccessful. The point may appear insignificant; but this simple variety of 'interior monologue' was to expand into one of Mr. Brett Young's favourite methods of combining an advance in characterization with an advance in the action; and in each novel he uses it with noticeably increasing skill—noticeable that is, needless to say, when one is looking out for points of technique, for otherwise he uses it so smoothly that it becomes less and less noticeable.

During a lapse of many novels, too, he was inclined to be chary of his excellent mildly humorous bent, the tolerant English irony which is now so roundly developed in him; and for a long time it was allowed only to appear in its harsher aspect, that one in which it implies an adverse criticism instead of merely illuminating an incongruity in a friendly way; and even then it is only allowed a part in such minor descriptive ornamentation as 'the choking fumes of chlorine . . . and the less tolerable, if more human, odour of sulphurated hydrogen.' He was obviously uneasy (as no poet should ever permit himself to be) in handling in prose even the most orderly outbursts of sentimentality; and we may behold the neo-Romantic counterblasting under his breath, half-loving, half-fearing those obscure movements in man's economy which end in public gestures of sacrifice and renunciation—and revealing a distinct disposition to praise God for them when they come, rather than undeviatingly to require them of man's Maker. That is the Beauty theme transferred to terms of conduct. To that *malaise* we must return.

The motifs of Beauty and Change and Time, and their unending debacle on all the scenes of the world, after having been briefly announced in the study of Robert Bridges, and after appearing fitfully in the experimental ventures of *Undergrowth* and *Deep Sea*, finds its first full and circumspect setting in *The Dark Tower*, in which rich book, however, with a vague cadenza which works in an unexpected series of modulations to the major key, it is capped with a happy ending of a sort—startlingly and incongruously, like a bust in a bowler. But that, perhaps, is only a Silurist's freak, and only intended to confirm the all-pervading queerness. Beauty's mercenaries in the other novels, down to *Pilgrim's Rest*, are vanquished all along the line before our inspecting eyes, and are not accorded any such advantageous terms. One cannot at the widest stretch of the imagination, speculate with the barest rudiments of cheerfulness upon their destinies, as one can speculate upon the fate of Alaric Grosmont, aloft in his dark tower.

Indeed, save that they are irrevocably lost, betrayed by sweetness and light, one has not the slightest clue upon which to estimate the probable course of their future history. No track goes on into the dark. From Edward Willis in *The Iron Age* to Abner Fellows in *The Black Diamond*, their personalities have faded out long before the last chapter and, when the book is shut, they straggle away, shorn of all possibility of future life (except in our memories), into such darkness that even their author's utmost effort of creative solicitude manifestly could not follow their actions. What they were is unforgettable; but it is impossible to think about them in the present or future tenses. The wildest, sharpest guess cannot recall

them, but neither can the most stolid shrug dismiss them.

They appear from time to time in one another's books, among the crowds in the backgrounds like Balzac's people, but they appear always under very different conditions. Either the appearance is at some prior and unessential moment of their lives, before the bands began to play and the dirty devices mustered for the siege; or else they move and speak creakily like folk who have returned from the dead. The terrific Furnival has almost enough sinister vitality to be an exception to this rule. He manifests himself whenever the decline and fall of the Sedgebury Main ('Fatherless Bairn') Coal Mine is touched on, and never fails to exhibit all the marks of strenuous existence; but, even so, *Cold Harbour*, the book in which he most lives (and from which in all probability it is that this vitality leaks) catches him long after the crash of 'Fatherless Bairn.' Apart from Furnival, only Edward Ingleby, whose features are, I suspect, largely autobiographical and therefore cannot quite lose their vital authenticity (what we see of them, for even in *The Young Physician* they do not emerge very distinctly, an odd effect which is often to be seen in autobiographies, a sort of defensive invisibility), only Edward Ingleby is brought fully on the stage again in after-life. He reappears in *Portrait of Clare* in full regimentals; but he is become a very different man.

Into the night go one and all, with these possible exceptions, unforgettably but inexorably. For it is not only a matter of lighting. In order that there might be room to spin out their destinies with the spacious ruthlessness required, Mr. Brett Young, in those early days, made his heroes and heroines less obviously real in

little ways than his subordinate characters, supporters and choruses. And so he fell under the influence of a dangerous habit which has destroyed lesser men and may have delayed the conception of the roomier, greater novels. He not only lighted these people less brilliantly (that is always a justifiable illusion, although a sufficiently difficult one), he also allowed them less actuality, so little that they should be unable to resist their exile into spiritual nothingness. There is as fatal a fascination about these two methods as about the illuminating and management of a toy theatre, but the employment of them both together (and the second at any time) seems to be a fault (not the less a fault for its fascination) in that, while it certainly adds to his pictures one more touch of transforming distance, it nevertheless detracts inevitably from the pity of his culminations. The doomed creatures have begun to falter long before their exits.

Perhaps the ambitious piece of re-designing, when taken together with the already strenuous labours of illumination—the primordial patterning of night and day reduced to a moment of space and time and focussed capriciously on the human scene—is not within human power to achieve. Perhaps the terms of the problem were self-contradictory—although in this as in any other self-contradiction in the novel form, it is hard not to feel that Tourgenieff might have brought the thing off with all his resources of gentleness and deftness and strength; might have been lavish with his characters, might have tricked them out in all the pride of the flesh, still have lit the stage obscurely, and yet have arranged for a sufficient *diminuendo*.

But, however that may be, almost certainly the combination of the two audacious campaigns—such a stern

beleaguerment of light and so steady a reduction of the spirit—is not possible to a young man in love with lyric poetry, who chooses rather to shiver at Beauty in the company of his characters than joylessly to control their joys. Later on, when the themes widen out and the young man, his lyrics precipitated, settles down comfortably to his prose, something of the sort is achieved and, what is more, is achieved on a larger scale. But it is not then the same thing. Indeed, I think that these later novels show us by their very success that the early attempts were foredoomed to failure. There was somewhere an irreconcilable contradiction at the root of the proposition. One must have the digestion for events of an ostrich if one is to develop the mental acids for this ultimate delicacy of handling; and the capacity for seeing visions of abstract beauty fades a little inevitably in the process of satisfying so voracious an appetite.

Hardy, it may be remarked, failed perpetually in an attempt of the kind, although he tried to have things the other way round, which is less difficult. In Hardy's novels it is the crowds that are undifferentiated, whilst the principal figures are sharply drawn. Thus, Hardy's yokels, prolific lumps of English earth as they are, scarcely differ at all from one another. They form a sort of reserve of traditional wisdom, excellent for moralization; but they hinder the movement of tragedy nevertheless. The mind of the race and the burden of the ages, delivered in bulk, can become singularly like a forest of cotton-wool—an unimpeachable but profoundly untragic medicament. This labyrinthine cotton-wool effect it probably was which made George Moore continually aver that he mistook large tracts of Hardy's novels for lumps of cold pudding.

Between these two opposed methods there lie great pitfalls of mediocrity. But that is the way of the world. The sonnet is inherently unepical; the epic is unhistorical; the history is unimaginative. You can't, as we were early advised, have it all ways. And yet, who knows that but for the interruption of war, Mr. Brett Young might not have brought it all off? We might have had more and greater *Dark Towers*—and no *House Under the Water*. And who is so bold that he would undertake to choose between such profitable alternatives?

For at the first experimental stage in his career, just after *The Iron Age*, it happened that the War removed Mr. Brett Young from his pre-occupations, as from his consulting-room; and now it was at last that he became a real versifying poet—although it is difficult to believe that his consciousness of 'the dirty devices' had been so unremitting till then that he had never previously felt or recorded an ecstasy demanding metre and rhythm. The War did not take him to France. This, one may safely suppose, was fortunate. The dirty devices were rather too disgustingly obvious in those parts. The Western Front released the poetry in many men, but only in such as had stout mental defences and could endure the new beauties released by the new adversity without stifling at the remembrance of the old beauties in their increasing danger. He threw up his practice at Brixham, where he had been for eight years, joined up as a lieutenant in the Army Medical Corps and went to the bush campaign of German East Africa in which he was opposed less to the sordid clashes of human warfare than to the romantic and mellower enmities of undergrowth and mileage and fever. It was a tonic change, and seems

to have set his mind free from the conviction that its leanings were to be inevitably towards the losing side. All things worked together towards confidence. He was himself trained to cope with disease, and he was provided with excellent company for the overcoming of the four other enemies. And most potent of all was the influence of the tropics themselves. In those latitudes Beauty to a northern eye seems to be holding her own; and home affairs take on a strangeness and a mild sadness most propitious to romantic verse.

The habit of prose composition, however, if not of prose thought, continued to hold him in the main, and the poems which first appeared under the title of *Five Degrees South*, and occupy half the collected volume of 1919, are in fact only the by-products from *Marching on Tanga*, which survives above its military competitors as a magnificent example of the prose which an intimate communion with wild nature sometimes stirs in tunable minds—the clear, unobscuring prose which is at its most perfect in Hudson's *Idle Days in Patagonia*, and makes of that book a sheer transparency through which the reader sees clean out, without hindrance of moral or epigram, to the pampas and wastes. In *Marching on Tanga* the old note is still distinguishable, but for once it is overmastered by a *joie de vivre*, an unfeigned delight in the inaccessibility of Man and his progress, a revelling in the company of the wild:

Where the soft ring-dove
Murmuring telleth
That dark sin only
From man's lust springeth
In man's heart dwelleth.

The Crescent Moon, published just after the War, reveals Mr. Brett Young still in his holiday mood, but with seriousness just preparing to break in—and, at the very end, succeeding. Though he is back in England, remembered aspects of the tropical forest are still coming up for consideration. He begins to doubt whether its brutality was so cleanly after all and so he drops two callow young people from Far Forest, Shropshire, a missionary and his guardian sister, into it like pieces of litmus paper, to see—with the probably unexpected result that the old theme comes crowding back in a music-hall, or pantomime, variation, like the ragging of freshmen through the laboratory window. But after a miracle of extrication, all ends, if not happily, at least nobly.

The Young Physician, his first effort in the 'slice of life' manner, is in part autobiographical; and even where it is not, Edwin Ingleby, though often a snob and a fool, is the result of Mr. Brett Young, the novelist, dreaming into action that part of himself which composed *Prothalamion*. It was conceived very early and actually begun before the War. *The Tragic Bride* casts back to the manner of *The Dark Tower*, perfects that perfection—and then breaks in two. *Wood-smoke*, which sets out to be a cool study of an imperfectly civilized and often abject type—and succeeds so well that it succeeds in being one of the few books in the world without a single worthy character—contains in an undercurrent of faint echoes, all the themes, simplified, afar off, and basely out of tune. *Sea Horses*, *The Key of Life* and *Black Roses* are all investigations into the conditions of Beauty, but the way is lost in them and their characters are only barely retrieved from their various wildernesses. The author is here, I

think, caught in two minds. His shining messengers have been sent too far and now are summoned back shivering through a desolate and expanded universe.

And then follow, in close succession, commodious, symphonic, innovating, but always thematically reminiscent, the broad Mercian novels. These works from *Portrait of Clare* onwards, differ from their fore-runners in more than size. They differ organically, or perhaps one should say in not being organic. They are richer, fuller, wiser, more instructive, more amusing—yet they are not the same sort of thing at all. In the sudden growth of their parts there has been an emergence of new spirit. *Jim Redlake*, for example, bears much the same relation to *The Young Physician* as Birmingham, or 'North Bromwich,' bears to that pleasant market town with its promising young industries, which lay at its roots a hundred years ago. The old shape is there, but it is full of a new amenity—and perhaps there is to some minds, more avid of atmosphere than of instruction, entertainment, or even enchantment, just the hint of an old amenity lost.

Before we proceed to closer quarters it may be well to ask ourselves, particularly those of us who have the toughish minds predicated by William James, 'What is this Absolute Beauty?' Is it simply a verbal trick assisted by a couple of capital letters? Is it philosophically permissible? Let us strive for a moment, as Plato bade us do all our lives, after the apprehension of forms. The answer is variously provided for; but 'Not entirely a trick, and permissible under most codes' would appear to be the likeliest version, satisfying even the hardened empirical enquirer. The belief in some common property in beautiful things is not just an accident of language, or a kind of pun of

ideas. We recognize in the most diverse objects, utterly differing in all other qualities, the common possession of beauty—or at least of the property of striking one and the same chord among our complicated perceptions, which is much the same thing.

The cult of Beauty as such, in fact, is a failing, awkward in other professions but proper to musicians, who feel, as Schopenhauer said for them, that while all the other forms of art clog the Will in Forms, music reveals it in its dazzling nakedness. And Mr. Brett Young is a musician in instinct, and in most of the movements of his mind.

I dare go no further, for I have the uneasy feeling that I have started a hundred fallacies already. But those are the lines upon which the symbol is formed, and may be justified. Temerarious indeed is the person who, not being Scottish by blood, contributes more than he must to that argument. Let us return to dogma, remarking only that Robert Bridges, who was an equally erudite musician, also used the word 'Beauty' quite copiously, and quite often uncritically. But as Disraeli said in a Budget speech, something must be left for future statements of this nature.

II

THE EARLY BOOKS

VII

‘UNDERGROWTH’

MR. PERCY LUBBOCK, pontificating unanswerably, lays it down, in *The Craft of Fiction*, that the subject of a novel, ‘what it is about,’ ought to be capable of expression in ten words. One dislikes these imperatives in matters of art; but it is as much as one’s ermine is worth to debate with Mr. Lubbock or even to neglect to act on his instructions when they are so explicit as this. And at all events it is an interesting experiment to attempt this brevity, this sort of formal witticism—a conditioned critical experiment not so very much unlike sonneteering in another art, or at least the composition of triolets, since the words must be picked out with a care which is positively unholy, and are always turning up a little wide of the mark. *Undergrowth*, then, is about the resentment of Nature at Man’s disturbance of her arrangements. I dislike that use of the word ‘Nature’ as much as most uses of the word ‘Beauty,’ although it is as readily definable; but what is good enough for our author ought to be good enough for us. Let me only remark, though probably this is cheating, that ‘Nature’ in this use embraces the supernatural. That is only the secondary subject, of course, the first being the defeat of Beauty. For the rest, ten English words in the hands of Francis Bacon could not cover all the subjects of a full-blooded English novel.

Undergrowth was the outcome of a collaboration (nearly all devised at the inn in Llanthony Abbey)

between Mr. Brett Young and his brother Eric, who later wrote those excellent detective stories *The Murder at Fleet* and *The Dancing Beggars*, and died in 1934. They wrote, so far as can now be remembered, alternate chapters, and alternate sections of the journal round which the action centres. This method of address must be highly unusual. Nevertheless, easy though it might be to perform spectacularly in the light of this reminiscence, I shall not attempt to drive a critical wedge between their shares. Fortunately that is as unnecessary as it might prove difficult, since clearly they thought in unison, and they certainly wrote similarly. Collaborations are intended to be read as wholes and should, one supposes, be so discussed. I shall take leave, therefore, to attempt no discrimination between the authors even in prose manner, and to treat the authorship in either the singular or the plural, as may happen to be convenient.

In this, his first novel, some combination of instincts still obscure (or of influences, which is the same thing at one remove), pitched him at once in the heart of his kingdom (or of an adjacent kingdom so similar as to be indistinguishable in essentials), and at the middle of his appointed themes. I say obscure instincts or influences since the main themes and half the people, after a little lazy introductory passage-work, are dropped, the mountains lose their contour and, as if the authors had asked themselves what a novelist was doing at this outer end of the English earth, amid all these Iberians, Celts and Yorkshiremen, eyeing one another, not always soberly, over their digging and shepherding, suddenly every crevice is filled with a steady flow of all-dissolving pseudo-mysticism. Or perhaps that is hardly the word. Perhaps there are no

pseudo-mysticisms in super-Nature, as there are no ghostlinesses wholly false; since in those low-lit realms beyond the veil, beyond words, beyond thought, and certainly beyond subterfuge, nothing is ever quite spurious any more than it is ever quite the reverse, for which reason it is that most of us feel called upon to visit them as briefly as may be, and seldom save in our bewildered and ethereal (and idle) early years. This much must be granted, however, that there is ‘an indefinable something’ about all this mid-Welsh border country; the kind of ineffableness which is, and has ever been, luxuriated in by the Celt, and simply adored, at a distance, by the Briton—an ineffableness which only the poetic imagination, working at great heat at the top of its bent and, as it were, sidelong, can marshal into words with the chance of any meaning to them.

And, except in those moments of highest insight and most infatuated utterance, the imagination is apt to translate all this otherness into some homelier, more workable key, often a mystical antiquarianism when not just helpless slobber. The whole thing is too much like a gamble with ideas for most modern philosophical tastes. Of this antiquarian type is this particular mysticism, of the Richard Jefferies variety expressing itself in the Machen manner:

Marsden and his philosophers adopt an attitude of deference towards the supernatural. It is the natural which is troubling me. I wonder if this conception of Fechner’s—the Earth as a guardian angel, ‘turning her whole living face to heaven, and carrying me along with her into that heaven,’ cost him one pang of that suffering and bewilderment in which I am lost. I wonder if the poets who

recognized the earth as the great mother ever went one further, and tried to merge their identity in hers—for this is the path along which my dreams are bearing me. I am willing to believe in the possibility of attaining this ultimate calm, but to me it is as distant as the islands which Saint Brendon visioned in the sunset west, and the path towards it is beset with terrors of the soul. I know that the work of evolution which has specialized my consciousness, the work of millions of ages stretching between the amoeba and the man that I am, must come toppling to the ground. I feel that I must lose everything which passes by the name of humanity. The whole structure of my identity must be dissolved. And then what can be left? Ashes to ashes: dust to dust.

It is instructive to compare this fluffiness with the good, documented ghostly influences of *Cold Harbour*. But in the last sentences it will be observed that the shadow of Professor Bergson has interposed for a moment, to set, as is its happy wont, everything apparently steady for a while; and in an interval of lucidity, as is often the outcome of these preternatural musings particularly when they are carried out under that Normalien shade, a few valuable sentences disengage themselves:

The Careg is the symbol of it all. Yet it is not at Blaen-nant that I feel nearest to the unique 'personality' of the mountain. The word is not out of place; every county has its atmosphere, and every range of hills. Artificial boundaries are often very real things; sometimes, by only crossing a river, one feels that one has come into a different air, and within another sphere of influence. In mountains

especially is this curious individuality of the soil strongly marked.

The story centres round the civil engineer in charge on the spot at the making of the reservoirs for the Birmingham (or ‘North Bromwich’ as it is called in the novels) water supply, and his vain struggles against the sinister spirituality of the valley Blaen-nant, which is, in detail, a valley in the Brecknock Black Mountains, the next valley to Llanthony Abbey, but in spirit the Elan Valley. The book opens with a short experiment in presentation, a curtain-raiser in a restaurant, which might have been eliminated and is, indeed, soon forgotten. There are one or two effective points in the drawing of the engineer, Forsyth. For example, no sympathy is exacted for him. He is morose at the beginning and downright rude and silly at the end, and is permitted to behave accordingly all along, central character though he is. He seems to arouse all his creator’s instincts for pathological research—instincts which, indeed, he may have been created to satisfy, since the baser forms of irritation and anger are known to doctors as symptoms of the highest significance. He is, in fact, a stock pathological case and is perhaps intended as a half-hearted touchstone for the mystical flummery to which he succumbs. Mr. Brett Young was to develop a trick of propounding biological problems for solution by the way. But nothing is sure in the book except Birmingham, which is etched in delightfully, again perhaps as a touchstone.

Forsyth finds a diary which was kept by his predecessor, who died mysteriously, also, one is given to suppose, under the enmity of the glen:

June 5th. I believe that I am beginning to understand the cause of my wretchedness. About the threshold of my consciousness there is war—red war. It was so deep down that for long I heard nothing of it but this vague rumour which has been fretting me, making my nights grey and my days full of misery. But last night, or rather early this morning, lying upon the verge of sleep I heard clearly the thunders of battle, the booming of heavy guns, and fear woke me. I know now that I am hopelessly fighting against myself, and, like a city divided, I fear that I shall fall. I know that my subconscious mind abhors the work that my conscious brain is doing; that one part of me, and that part which I believe to be permanent, views this road that I have driven through the valley like the scar of a sword-cut, and this vile insult of a dam which yokes the unsullied river, as horrible things.

Again the fact of collaboration may, or may not, be all-explanatory; but perhaps it is simplest to assume about the whole book a duality of the kind inferred in that passage and to conclude that the author, in the dual personality of young mystic and younger doctor, was pondering all the while with a proper measure of subconsciousness, a joint thesis on the oneness of mountain districts and the ætiology of mountain neurasthenia.

But the young mystic, the more diverting partner, has it all his own way at the end. All the mysteriousness plays in chief round a neolithic (or rather, of course, 'druidal') monolith which by a series of upheavals, sometimes alcoholic, but in the main industrial is brought to be embodied in the doorpost of Forsyth's lodgings! This circumstance, which involves a doctrinal extravagance impossible to the true mystic, not

unnaturally contributes to his downfall, and somehow assists in high cabal at the bursting of the dam at the reservoir.

It is startling to be told that some of the events were prophetic of actual happenings. But there is indeed a queer strain of authenticity about the book. At the end the reader feels a mustering of potential about him, for all the world as though he had been visiting a storage battery. This is unlooked-for in a first novel and not too common in a twentieth.

VIII

'DEEP SEA'

DEEP SEA, the second novel to appear but in its essentials the first to be conceived, is a series of apprentice exercises—in presentation, characterization and prose—which tries nobly to pass itself off as a normal specimen of the plain novel of commerce. It is the work of a young physician newly primed with human examples. Nobody would have supposed it to be the work of a novelist of more than ordinary capability, hardly even of the author of *Undergrowth*. It is 'about' love fading into marriage, and shipwreck and death.

Of the experiments in presentation the one with which the book opens proceeds on lines curiously similar to those chosen by Proust in his experiments with his Aunt Léonie. For what it is worth, it may be remembered that Proust's father was a doctor and he himself vastly interested in medicine. Our author confesses himself a lover of Proust from the first volume of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*; but that did not appear until after the publication of *Deep Sea*. The scene is laid in Brixham where he had been in practice for some years. A paralysed fisherman lies all day at an upper window and overlooks the activities of the market-place and the quay while people ask him from time to time if he calls himself a man :

It was as though the glass insulated him from the currents of human sympathy which proved so

treacherous to his peace of mind. When once the window was closed he found that the jolly trawlers hailed him no longer. His presence was no more heeded than that of a spirit gazing on the haunts of its material life. The brilliant atmosphere of the harbour became blurred, the clear babel of the market grew indistinct, and the scene which had tormented him as part of the life which he had longed for and could no longer share seemed no more than a picture, lacking perspective: a pantomime full of unimaginable gesture. The transparent curtain of ancient glass fortified his impatience with the detachment of a dreamer.

Since he had discovered the magical properties of this talisman, Jeffery had never tried to overcome the spell which it cast upon him. He never bothered his head about the intimate sequences of gesture, movement or speech; and though he knew every one of the actors upon the stage, his interest in their doings became almost impersonal—so that when he saw his wife thrust her slim shoulders into a gap in the middle of the buyers, and watched her head sharply incline towards the salesman as she made her bid, he hardly realized that she was a creature of flesh and blood—flesh of his flesh—the woman who was now forced to earn his bread for him and in moments of unwelcome candour let him know it.

Notice how it grows loose when it becomes personal; and how attractively grave it becomes again as we return to the exciting little question of presentation—the writing of novels, in fact.

For the greater part of the day this silent shadow-play would flit across his retina without making any appeal to consciousness, and then, when he least

expected it, the puppets would suddenly tumble into life: the whole scene would take him like a slap in the face, so that he shrank back into his corner and screwed his eyes up to shut it all out—and when he opened them, furtively, as likely as not he would find himself in a dream again.

It was generally when it took him by surprise—as blinding daylight in the eyes of a sleeper—that this conscious sympathy with the life of the quay unnerved him. At the other times he would stimulate his languid interest in the familiar figures by playing with certain curious errors of refraction in the old glass of the window. The bottom left-hand pane had been finished in an irregular whorl and presented to him a concave surface which would play tricks with the most faultless anatomy. . . . And so meticulously was he acquainted with the powers and limitations of his medium that by a minute turn of the head, or the dropping of an eyelid, he could transform (his wife) into a dozen varieties of monster.

After that proficient introduction it is a pity that the use of Jeffery as chorus should be almost completely discontinued; although it is true that the chorus continues in the family, for his wife is sedulously used wherever possible, often out of all probability, to attend further embroilments.

For the rest the book contains some very deft writing (which, in particular, tries out a gaudier sort of metaphor than we ever meet again in the novels until *The House Under the Water*); a little excellent aphoristic wisdom with a faint medical tinge, and again a smack of introspective analysis:

It was this timidity in the enjoyment of friendship that had scared his friends . . . ;

and what must surely be among the earliest instances in any literature of the trick of introducing your young couple to married life by invoking the wares and wiles of the instalment furnisher and the lathe and plaster of the speculative builder :

The Henshall's house stood ninth, and last but one, in a newly-constructed terrace. A speculative builder, who had been dancing a tight-rope above bankruptcy for over ten years, and only kept going by mortgaging new ventures, had used this terrace as a sort of dumping ground, running up an odd house or two at an incredible speed when work was slack in the lower part of the town and his men began to grumble at short time. He found it an ideal hiding-place for defective material. For very shame he had covered the rubbishy brickwork with a front of stucco ; but all the refinements of his trade, except those which are calculated to hide bad workmanship, he had dispensed with. What could they expect for the money? Pretty little houses, 'models,' he called them—at twelve pounds a year. For the mixing of his mortar he used a sprinkling of lime and bucketfuls of sea-sand—stuff that is greedy of water ; and in the almost tropical rains of the following summer the stucco began to crack. Water steadily oozed through the outer wall on to the pink trellis paper, so that the parti-coloured parakeets of the frieze turned their heads sideways in disgust at the spreading stain of moisture.

The master jerry-builder of *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington* is seen far-off.

The book sets before us, apart from these devices, one or two women protected from, or avenged for, molestation by the fists of a fisherman, providentially

passing; a bevy of girls whose beauty throws back to a wrecked Armada galleon; an auction, minutely described, intended to make it clear that a smack changes hands, and for no other purpose whatever in the world; a mortgage on a trawler, available to be set off against caresses; the sight of the beloved in church, the cry of heart to heart amid the pews and pealing; and a babbling proposal and a blushful acceptance. A readable, a 'promising' novel in fact, the novel of commerce at its best, except that it is a shade wanton in its mode of presentation. Very nice, as the farmers said of the claret, but brings us no forrader.

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IX

'THE DARK TOWER'

THE DARK TOWER is 'about' the soul of man and the technique of the Novel. Mr. Brett Young holds, I should think, as many 'records' as any novelist of our epoch-making era, but I doubt if any of his feats is more remarkable than the production, simply, of this glowing book immediately after the respectable, efficient *Deep Sea*.

There is no hint of the fumbling of inexperience anywhere in *The Dark Tower*, although the whole is in a sense a technical experiment. Neither is there any hint, indeed, of 'promise,' it is far too full-fledged a thing. It is a little miracle of presentation. We are told often enough by reviewers, and button-holed by publishers on dust-jackets overmuch, about books which are too enthralling to put down, and as a rule we know what to believe; but the compliment approaches the dignity of literalness when applied to *The Dark Tower*—not because the book is inescapably enthralling, it is too fine a piece of craftsmanship to be so crudely commended, but because one fears to injure by interruption the lovely formal pattern which it sets weaving in the mind; and, a point often overlooked by the enthusiastic reviewer, it is short enough to be read at one comfortable sitting. I have already quoted Mr. Percy Lubbock's other commandment that a true novel should be surveyed from without as a piece of deliberate artistry. Apart from perhaps a few pieces of Tourgenieff, and the poetical, yet, somehow,

underhanded masterpieces of Mrs. Virginia Woolf, I know of none that calls so peremptorily to be held up to the light as *The Dark Tower*, unless it might be *The Tragic Bride*—which always invites, but never quite survives the ordeal.

There is no hint of experiment, no debris of the workshop lies about in *The Dark Tower* to confuse the attention, and yet the unity of the book has been contrived with an elaboration easier than Joseph Conrad's and less anxious than Henry James's. The story is told alternately by two sympathetic men of letters, who regard its telling as a conversational game, a kind of guessing-bee, a friendly, almost an ambassadorial, exchange of techniques. Neither possesses completely any one of its facts and they both poetize over it as the whim takes them, making occasionally delicious mock of each other for their indolent guesswork. Each adduces from time to time, with annotations, other versions of phases of the story, related from other standpoints by other distant spectators, until there is witness within witness like a Chinese nest of boxes.

Many novelists before have devised a manageable subjectivity and the effect of a romantic past for their story by setting up what Henry James, their great exemplar, prettily called 'a definite responsible intervening first person singular, possessed of infinite sources of reference'; but there does not seem to be another instance of the dual person being so invoked. It is as if guests with unexpected stores of information should suddenly not only contradict but succeed in partially supplanting the omniscient Marlow at one of Conrad's after-dinner parties. Attention is focussed by this duality still more upon

the conversational courtesies and humours of the present, so that the story is thrust still further into the past. Alaric, Judith and Charles Grosmont, playing out their weirds behind all these relays of distance, show to the mind's eye of the reader minute, intense and yet vague, and have the legendary look of familiar things seen in the ground glass of a camera. Spectacular but remote, the dirty devices deploy against Alaric the moon-faced quietist, who is gradually brought upon the scene to encounter them by the calling to mind of fragments of slowly remembered meetings. Every fresh lineament goes on casually and a thought obliquely—the straw-hat, worn with the morning-coat, the escort of the perambulator, the tramping and the chopping of firewood for pay—but the result is infinitely removed from caricature. Thus, at the first meeting, the announcement as it were:

A door opened—a lovely Norman door it was; the lamp threw into relief the dog's-tooth carving of the arch; and the man who carried it seemed very tall; with a black cloak—Inverness, do you call them?—over his shoulder. He held the lamp before him, so that he could not see outside. A helpless, unpractical way of doing things. . . . His back view was really not unlike that of many seedy orchestral players—the kind of people you see drifting away from the platform doors of a concert room. . . .

Thus begins one of the best darknesses in fiction, the darkness of *The Dark Tower*.

Alaric discusses music; it is pretty well all that he ever does discuss:

I told him that I had heard the opera (Debussy: *Peleas et Melisande*), that Mary Garden was a

marvellous Melisande. 'It is a terrible thing, terrible,' he said in a very low voice. Now you know that pale crepuscular kind of music seems to me too thin to be terrible at all. P'ff, and it's gone. . . . I asked him what he meant by that. 'I mean the part that isn't written,' he said.

Alaric has a piano at which he spends most of his time; he seems however, to possess no proper piano-forte music at all but only boiled-down versions of orchestral and choral works. Of those he has a sweeping range from Palestrina to Franck and Elgar.

Charles, his brother, is drawn in much the same way, although with less sympathy—or rather, what sympathy there is comes from the secondary and feminine 'sources of reference':

You must try to see what was in that round Norman head of his . . . not a great deal I'm afraid, not even his father's dreams. I don't mean that he had not engrained in him the Treicastel idea. That quick exclamation of his in Dr. Meredith's study when he heard of his father's losses, shows that the habit of thought came natural to him. 'We must never sell Treicastel,' sounded intense and spirited, didn't it? If you have ever lived with a parrot, you may have heard one of these remarkable birds put a courageous face on a subject in the same way. On old Mr. Grosmont's tongue the words would have stood for a flaming spiritual aspiration. With Charles they were only a symbol of helplessness. He couldn't sell Treicastel, because he didn't know how to live without it. It was just a strong tower to shelter him from the necessity of fighting his own battles. I don't deny that he had courage of a kind; indeed it would have taken another century to whittle down the

Grosmont spirit to a physical cowardice, but of spiritual courage—the kind of courage which enabled Alaric to drift down from the eyrie (I take your figure) with the first joy of flight, he hadn't an atom.

Judith, his wife, who is to be Alaric's, one guesses, in the end, is brought on almost without description, except of the impact of her idea on almost everyone else.

You know how fatal ideas are to the Grosmonts. . . . She was a sort of Persephone—daughter of the earth—whom he had crowned with flowery innocence; and suddenly, when she spoke of her dead baby, he realized that she had been the bride of Hades. That's putting it rather badly for Charles, isn't it? But you know what I mean. Her angel innocence dropped from her; she became a little red-haired Celt with a milky skin, green eyes—and no freckles—instead of a swift bewildering example of the 'rhythm of life.' As if childbearing weren't just as much a part of the 'rhythm of life' (oh! the illusions of these Silurists!) as the fruiting of a wild cherry, so delicately accomplished by the easy-mannered breezes of April.

That is the sort of thing, a brisk differentiated motion, accompanied by a quiet but expert loosing of arrows. On the other hand the 'sources of references' give themselves away completely with delightful exactitude. This is the wife of the local doctor, spinning the first strands of Judith's vague portrait:

I always doubted if that miserable dispirited Mrs. Gwyn would rear her. But you can never go by that can you? You would hardly believe, to look at

me now, that *I* was a delicate child. My dear, I can perfectly well remember when I was a little girl travelling down to the country in a sort of big omnibus (there were no railways in mid-Wales then), and on the top of the omnibus my own special goat. Indeed, I was brought up on goat's milk. And—how the new young doctors would shudder!—three wine glasses a day of old port. I must have been like my grandfather; for I declare I never went to bed sober.

The book ends upon an indeterminate note, with the magnificent dark of its opening about to fall again; but that this too is a quietly deliberate contrivance and in no sense a shirking of the many issues raised, is made clear by the sudden entanglement (a wanton entanglement it would almost seem at first sight) and as sudden disentanglement of all the strands of the story right at its conclusion. Alaric confesses, with no motive except such as may be discerned in the involutions of his Silurist mind, to the murder of his brother—whom nobody dreams of supposing to have been murdered. To which babblement the coroner listens patiently and then in the grand manner not unusual with minor royalty takes no further notice of the babbler.

The source of reference for this pregnant scene is a quoted newspaper-cutting. This sudden intervention of the workaday world is probably the only sort of thing which could have been imagined to confer authority upon the amazing situation. And by means of a piece of journalistic pastiche as convincing as it seems possible for anybody, not being one of Nature's journalists, to contrive, it amazingly does confer authenticity upon the circumstantial improbability.

But there is a quality about a coroner's court—perhaps it is the imposing of a formal element, with a medical bias, on one of the supreme moments of somebody's life—that appeals to Mr. Brett Young almost disproportionately, and draws out his starkest powers of verisimilitude. He convenes a vivid inquest in almost every other novel.

This book, like *Undergrowth*, was conceived in Landor's Llanthony Abbey; and the Dark Tower itself has some of the features of the inn in the abbey ruins. Urishay Castle, a derelict mansion, in remotest Mid-Wales, miles from anywhere, its internal decorations long ago gone to America, contributed to the picture. This residence, already decaying, was inhabited in Mr. Brett Young's student days by the last of the actual Delahay family. And a scandal in Welsh Hay contributed a minor character and some of the tone of the odd denouement.

Alaric Grosmont is one of Mr. Brett Young's best creations and, perhaps it may prove his most permanent. It was a stroke of poetical genius to call this unadulterated soul by a Gothic name. He is somehow new to civilization—and yet immensely capable of it. We catch fleeting glimpses of Alaric in other novels, more than once in *Portrait of Clare*. At the time of that book he is a lawyer's clerk (Dudley Wilburn's to be precise) and (it is a typical and a loving touch) seems 'proud of knowing nothing about his employer's business.' These re-appearances of friendly characters in solid print ought theoretically to be welcome enough; and yet we are a little inclined, I think, most of us to resent Alaric's. In our own hearts we know that we shall never lose sight of him, and there is just the faintest fear that additions, even

prior additions, to his picture will overdo him, or else erase him. He has become a part of our profoundest experience, along with Parsifal, and Saint Francis and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and perhaps, if our hearts are wide enough, with Mr. Polly and Charlie Chaplin. But it is manifest that only a poet should venture dogmatically into the discussion of Alaric Grosmont; and, by a stroke of great good fortune, it chances that Mr. De La Mare has discussed him and his tower at some length*:

He is one of those oddities which we snobs all look at (preferably down our noses) and then look away from (in common decency). But get him away—if possible *down* steps—into some old tavern or bookshop; talk to him; watch his mind in his eyes; persuade him (if you can) to share himself with you. His only fault is—and he hasn't an inkling of it—that you cannot but feel something of a worm in his company, shallow and meretricious.

In that passage Mr. De La Mare has probably written the loosest prose of his life! Which, presumably, we may take as a measure of his addiction!

* In *The Borzoi*, 1925 (Knopf, New York), a very pretty publisher's symposium (they order these things better in America). Mr. De La Mare discloses here, always in that curiously *moved* prose, that *The Dark Tower* is one of his favourite, nay, one of his private, books. ' . . . Recommendation is not my incentive. Far otherwise. I should neither sigh nor shiver if I heard that *The Dark Tower* was finally out of print and that by a series of happy accidents every other copy but my own (and possibly Mr. Brett Young's) had been destroyed. I *may* some day visit the British Museum in the hope of . . . But never mind.'

X

‘THE IRON AGE’

MR. PERCY LUBBOCK’S statutory ten words are a world too wide to describe the story of *The Iron Age*. It is ‘about’ Love and again Love and Love yet again.

As *Undergrowth* planted us at one imaginary end of the Birmingham pipe-line so *The Iron Age* plants us more practically at the other. The scene is industrial Birmingham and its environs, and in this one alone among the novels the scene is never changed. The story is carefully told and is ‘eminently readable.’ It makes a good tight start and a somewhat shapeless end—although perhaps this shapelessness is part of the scheme. Each of the author’s main themes makes an appearance in it, glistens fitfully for a phrase or so and then is hauled off to hard labour, condemned to take part in the construction of an ‘eternal triangle.’

At this time of day it ought not to be necessary to apologize for the pot-boilers which appear from time to time amidst work of a high order. The phenomenon is not unfamiliar on the highest reaches of Olympus. Among the symphonies of Beethoven the odd numbers are notoriously the best and fullest, the even numbers, especially number four, inclining so far as the work of musical genius (the most intense of all kinds of genius, because the least able to waste itself among worldly concerns) ever can incline, to the commercial product—although if you come to look at it properly there have not been many composers who would not

have given their ears to have written number four! Iconoclasts are said to have detected more than a trace of some such counteraction even in the Forty-eight Preludes and Fugues. At any rate, it is not surprising to meet these ups and downs in the work of artists, although the real commercial workers may very well contrive to maintain a relatively level output. There is an even stranger alternation of good and goodish noticeable in many other serious novelists—for example George Moore and Thomas Hardy. *The Dark Tower* was an unfamiliar sort of book, and who knows but that even in the more discriminate days before the War it did not go down very well? *The Iron Age* is a competent book. It was published late in 1914 and it ends with probably the first instance of what was later to become a favourite trick of denouement—the disposal of the already-dead by enlistment in August. Another record, I should say, for our inventive author.

The prose manner is adequate or perhaps at moments a little better than adequate. The description of the works at Mawne may be taken as a fair specimen:

And this is the wonder of Mawne; that right in the heart of the works where the very air is acrid on the tongue and all the earth overlaid with cinders, you are conscious all the time of a sweet enveloping countryside, smooth hills and wooded dingles which stand waiting upon the edge of that parched and blackened shell of a country. Here through the very crowding of the sky with dust and carbon, the sunsets are often dazzlingly beautiful, breaking into caverns of molten gold beside which the furnace fires are pale.

And again, on a somewhat higher level, perhaps the highest in the book:

In reality the glowing microcosm of Mawne, the colliery, the great Mawne furnaces, the brickfields, and the now neglected gun-barrels were nothing more than a spluttering fragment cast off into space from the great core of fire which kindled murderously in 1870.

There is an unusual quantity of wit in the conversations—of verbal wit, indeed, a quality which Mr. Brett Young does not bother much about ordinarily.

Edward Willis, ineffectual young man, with a poet's inclinations and some brains, but absolutely no powers of volition or even of everyday judgement—a practical Alaric—works out his destiny, and meets his inevitable revelation of the world's unpleasantness, through the medium of the wife of the manager of his father's factory. He makes no more visual impact upon the reader than his fellows in the other novels, but he is very much more articulate than they. He might be regarded as the major prophet of Mr. Brett Young's mythology up to this time if it were not that he so continually overdoes it. He goes over the main heads of his creator's case at every opportunity—which is to say at each of his emotional crises, and they are beyond number—goes over them with such excess of self-examination and such an utter lack of self-discipline, that his lightest word would surely bring an uneasy hush upon even a roomful of minor poets and freshmen in Pimlico, discussing love and its fruits and all its allied problems. It is as though the very padding spoke at every pore. 'Beauty maddens me,' Edward remarks in the thick of his difficulties. 'I'm parched,

thirsty—and it's a quivering image of sweet water. I wish I may never see anything beautiful again.' Even his thoughts to himself are inflated with a like eloquence.

His wish is accorded him, and he duly fades. But the assistant characters and especially his half-sister, Lilian, are drawn with obvious care and even made to speak with verisimilitude. Lilian Willis tingles with emotion as readily as her brother, but never bubbles over. Indeed, she speaks with marked reticence, as all people with such temperaments do in real life since they are the shyest of mortals. Her one noteworthy outburst comes in a crisis of courtesy, which is the kind of thing which afflicts them most. 'I'm afraid I must go on,' she says (she is taking leave after a chance meeting in the street. 'You'll excuse me, won't you?') She couldn't explain that she had an appointment with 'a hedge of hawthorn on the point of bursting.' The bent of these two young temperaments ensures that the delicate touches of psychological understanding in which Mr. Brett Young always abounds (except in his two naturalistic novels, where they appear duly but are not delicate) are never more profuse than in *The Iron Age*.

Stafford, the manager, also comes to life with surprising vividness, and might, one feels, have been in part conceived by Mr. Wells in the *Tono Bungay* period, and in part by Mr. Shaw in his novel-writing nonage. And there is the first appearance of a Dr. Moorhouse, who plays also an important part in the chorus of *Cold Harbour*, and may be taken here as in some sense an antidote to the vibrant Edward—as a sager prophet of the novels to be. Dr. Moorhouse spends his spare time snuffling among barrows and

'imagining a book on the Neolithic times on Uffdown. A social satire' (it is Edward's description, of course). In Vienna they would probably call him a projection of the excavatory impulse in his author, the desire to penetrate deep into his beloved country; and, Freud or no Freud, it is curious that the doctor should appear again in *Cold Harbour*, in which this mystical feat is almost performed. This is how he talks in this book:

You know, Edward, that whatever you make of it, Mawne does represent a very solid achievement. That's why I like that lowering cloud of smoke. At a distance I admit. But all the same I like it. It's something of a symbol for me who am out of the struggle that the work of humanity is going along. In the same blundering way as ever, of course. We never hit on the right one directly. Through alchemy we stumble into medicine; through steam-power we make electricity practicable. And, of course, there are by-products . . . unpleasant by-products like soot and alkali refuse. It's just the same with my job. God! . . . if you realized the mess that medieval physicians made of things! . . . We've moved so extraordinarily rapidly. Think of the relatively insignificant space of time between you and me and the dolichocephalic gentleman in the barrow which you gracefully adorned, as you're telling me, in your youth. Think what we've done in the time! . . . Has it ever occurred to you—call it, if you like, a fantastical idea—that the whole brief adventure of man's civilization might conceivably be another blind alley in evolution? That this world, and not impossibly other worlds, might really be waiting for the domination of a creature less ridiculously susceptible to bacterial invasion than man?

Mr. Brett Young does not set any character to play with that 'fantastical idea' again, or, at least, bring it forth publicly; but it seems never to be wholly out of the hinterland of his mind. And when the narrow, if far-reaching, theme of hurt and fading beauty is taken up on a greater scale we may think of it, if we choose, as one of the keys into which modulation transitorily occurs on the way to re-statement.

XI

‘MARCHING ON TANGA’

ABOUT *Marching on Tanga* it may be as well to strike an immediate warning note. The book is contained as strictly within the ‘German East’ campaign, the greatest military movement ever carried out in the tropics so far as records show, as a triolet is contained within its seven lines and severe conditions; and the first edition is illustrated by many snapshots from the author’s own camera and a map excelling in dotted lines; yet nevertheless a student requiring exact information would be well advised to go to the opposition, to General von Lettow’s account and allow for windage. *Marching on Tanga* is concerned with the spirit of the expedition and with such incidentals as the look of Kilimanjaro from day to day, the alterations in a man when he runs from death through the scrub or fights it in a fever, with devil-dances and forest fantasies and generally untopical matters; and with the exhibiting of these things through an exquisite transparent prose.

The character-drawing is, as ever afterwards, marvellously economical, and brightly outlines the subsidiary figures, the natives, the tommies, the occasional colonels, old M—— the one-armed elephant-hunter from Skye, who was to dominate *The Crescent Moon*; and a host of helpers:

For a moment I saw Bishop Furse of Pretoria, that most military Christian. He was going to attach himself, he said, to Smuts’ head-quarters.

‘If he’ll have me,’ he added, for he knew the General well, and respected him for a strong man like himself. ‘He fears neither God nor man,’ he said, ‘and particularly the former.’

The essentials of two men (three perhaps), one faintly unpleasant although it is hard to say why, are in that brief, careless, almost journalistic note. And on the other hand, on the larger canvas, Proust himself (if he could have been brought to envisage such plain-sailing movement in space) could hardly have better or more elaborately interwoven, from the first announcement of the first theme, the pervading personality of Jan Smuts, glimpsed only three or four times and not heard to utter a dozen phrases, yet continually filtering like a bugle through the bush.

Troops are sketched in with bright dexterity, and there are many apparently lazy but really very dexterous flashes into the soul of primitive man, as well as of civilized man behaving in a primitive way :

Next morning before dawn I was awakened by a sound with which later days made me very familiar, the noise of several thousand Indians hawking and scraping their throats, the ceremony with which their day is begun. . . . It was a heavy morning with a low sky drooping from Kilimanjaro upon the forest lawns.

England is seen, far-off, as if through a diminishing glass :

All through the Pagani trek I carried in my haversack one book, a thin paper copy of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, but what I read more often, in the little light that was left for reading, was a small-scale Bartholomew map of England, finely

coloured with mountains and meadowlands and seas, and there I would travel magical roads, crossing the Pennines or lazing through the blossomy vale of Evesham, or facing the salt breeze on the flat top of Mendip at will. In these rapt moments the whole campaign would seem to me nothing but a sort of penance by means of which I might attain to those ‘blue remembered hills.’

Or, more intuitively, is perceived in a gush with a sudden refinement of feeling, and takes the heart by storm :

We were passing through a narrow way between grasses as high as a man’s shoulder, and this change from the alien atmosphere of the bush was subtly re-assuring, as though we had really stumbled into some pathway cutting a moonlit cornfield at home.

Marching on Tanga, a concentration of bright moments seen through the various degrees of distance, physical and mental, imposed by new sensations, new bodily ardours and the high seas, may be regarded as the first finished product of the foundry in which Mr. Brett Young, resigning the purposive close verbal texture of his first writings, hammered out this long-pulsed, natural prose of his which now sets stirring so effortlessly the troubled beauty of England and English men and women, and the ugly onrushes of the mechanical era—the root emotions of humanity in frail opposition to the tides of modernity.

Professor Jespersen, that inspired philologist, has thrown off, among innumerable aids to the comprehension of the growth of consciousness in Mankind, the suggestion that speech began with the phrase, in complicated, but recognizable cries, and was refined down, through incalculable generations of savage

platonists, to the word. Some sort of free fantasia of a theory might almost be founded upon this suggestion, to explain the vast differences in expressive power which exist among ostensibly civilized men, to account for the extreme inarticulateness which is to be found coupled with extreme volubility in so many estimable public figures of our time—and for the nagging precision of Bloomsbury pamphleteers; to explore the ranges between, let us say, the world that divides the expression of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and that of Mr. J. C. Powys, though both are emotive rather than intellectual writers; and, getting back to first principles, to examine the mind of the dedicated man of action whose whole imaginative life, from his stammerings at his crammer's to his election as Vice-President predestinate of the ultimate Golfing Society, takes place between the systole and diastole of one mighty and generous idea, of Patriotism, of Charity, of Love for Animals or, in more complex cases, more sicklied over, of the History of the Lost Tribes or the Authorship of Shakespeare.

But this is no place for linguistic debate or the institution of new branches of the psycho-analytical science. Here it must suffice to repeat that as there is a language for the emotions and a language for the intellect, so for every attitude to life there is its proper focus in words, and that this may be best attained by pitching upon some unfailing foreground symbol; that for every point of view it is possible to define too sharply as it is possible to enlarge too diffusely; and that for his vision of dwindling Beauty, walking our English fields, Mr. Brett Young found, in *Marching on Tanga*, after many trials, the exact adjustment of vision and presentation.

XII

'THE CRESCENT MOON'

AND now, most helpfully but somehow oddly, almost as if to show its beauty unadorned by the necessities of logic like the lovely vacancies of a lady in a film, Mr. Brett Young proceeded to employ his finished prose in a melodramatic tale not unworthy of the later Rider Haggard. The emotions and manners of *Marching on Tanga* are carried over to *The Crescent Moon* and transposed with a flood of modal contrivances—Astarte worships and older and worse vagaries—into the most flamboyant keys imaginable. It is a queer book, and perhaps it was a relief to write it. Some experiences are so real that it is imperative to dodge them into a kind of mockery. For nine-tenths of its length it hardly amounts to more than a shilling shocker of Africa, but all the while the excellence of the telling prevents the rising of the gorge, just as at the picture-show an occasional excellence of photography will often do.

Mr. Brett Young keeps one steady hand, as ever, upon England. Far Forest, a village near Bewdley, begot his two young people, new victims of predestined ineffectuality. They are brother and sister. He, preternaturally grave and unhumorous, is the willing prey of a progressive religious mania, which is sympathetically drawn, with a doctor's wisdom, and is from the outset ingeniously related to the theme of Beauty:

I am almost sure that James had adenoids as a child, for in the photo his lips were parted, his nose a little compressed, and the upper lip too short. And later, she told me, because of the headaches which came with 'too much study' he had to wear glasses; but in the photograph which she showed me you could see his dark eyes, the distant eyes of a visionary. I suppose in the class from which he came there are any number of young men of this kind, born mystics with a thirst for beauty which might be slaked in any glorious way, yet finds its satisfaction in the only revelation that comes their way, in a religion from which even the Reformation has not banished all beauty whatsoever. They find what they seek in religion, in music (such music! . . . but I suppose it's better than nothing), in the ardours of love-making; and they go out, the poor uncultivated children that they are, into the 'foreign mission field,' and for sheer want of education and breadth of outlook, die there . . . the most glorious, the most pitiful of failures. That, I suppose, is where Christianity comes in. They don't mind being the failures that they are.

There we have James; and thereafter, down to his really most impressive end, we never lose him.

Eva, his sister, accompanies him to his 'field' in East Africa. There is a likable unity about Eva's character; but then she is unperplexed by the insoluble problem of how to interest the devil-dancing natives, whose every breath is drawn to a ritual of the utmost elaboration in the non-ritualistic practice of the calvinistic doctrine. She is simply looking after her brother. Eva in fact is splendid; so girlish yet so true. She is for ever staggering beyond her womanly strength about the bush on some womanly errand or other,

conveying mercy or escaping seduction. One begins to regard her as the foredoomed, and indeed the proper, victim of the terrible looming Godovius, German planter and scholarly worshipper of the *Ur-Astarte*. Even when the old elephant-hunter, a likelier Allan Quatermain, stumbles in his turn out of the forest and falls ill in an outhouse, one doubts if he will avail to save her although it is clear that she must come to love him despite the disparity in their ages.

And so it goes on, until suddenly, within forty pages of its conclusion, the silly story takes an epic turn. Mr. Brett Young has an unusual aptitude for these sudden redemptions.

The War breaks out. The natives break into revolt: one foresaw it. Godovius breaks into a not unforeseen quixotry and releases M'Crae, the elephant-hunter, whose person he has secured, to get Eva out of the country, and to return on parole. For himself, he is a German and a soldier, and will see the thing through.

It is all predicable; yet over the well-worn scheme there slowly gathers an unescapable conviction of authenticity. The sillinesses become noble follies; the bush adventures, epic treks; the religious mania, a magnificent martyrdom:

'You have mistaken me, Mr. M'Crae,' he said. 'I have given you my authority to take my sister. You realize, no doubt, the trust which that implies, and that we are quite in your hands. But my own position is quite different. Perhaps you do not know what religion means to a man, or how a man in my position regards his mission. I was sent to Africa to devote myself to these unfortunate people. I have a responsibility. If the devil has entered into their hearts this is the occasion on which they need

me most. You spoke just now a little contemptuously of Scripture. I am a minister, and perhaps it means more to me. At any rate, these words, if you'll have the patience to hear me, mean a great deal: "He that is a hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming and leaveth the sheep and fleeth." You know who spoke those words. Mine must be the part of the good shepherd. If I behaved as a hireling I could not bear to live.'

The story, it may have been observed, has been told, as usual, through layers of reference. A German prisoner of war completes the history of James:

You are a Protestant. You do not know. . . . If you had been in the Roman Catholic churches in Poland (he got it right that time) you would have seen the human-size crucifixes which frighten the children with a big dead Christ. It was on the pulpit. They had hung him there on the pulpit with big nails. Through his neck was a carpenter's chisel. Other nails and the hammer were lying on the floor. In his black coat he hung with his feet tied together. He was far gone, as you say Pff! . . . Oh, it was very bad. And the black swine had mutilated him in the way that Africans, even our own askaris, use with their enemies. You know. . . . Pff! It was too awful. I tell you I could not stay there to offer up the prayer that I had intended in that place. I went out. I could not bear the sight of that crucified man. I ran after them. I was afraid to be alone. You will understand; I was not allowed to carry arms.

XIII

‘THE YOUNG PHYSICIAN’

UPON which unlikely triumph, our author, most various of men in outward semblance, most constant in vision, embarked on the kind of book which, with a few relapses and one triumphant return to the lyrical, he has since found to satisfy his needs. *The Young Physician* is a chronicle novel, a slice-of-lifer. It existed in outline before the War.

A verifiable streak of autobiography is supposed to be essential in the chronicle novel. Such a streak is very apparent in *The Young Physician*; but, rather remarkably, it is only to be detected in one other of its successors. I should add at once that it is not in the principal facts of the story so much as in their spiritual accompaniments and overtones, and—as ever—in its minor characters, that resides this well-nourished aspect of reality. Edwin Ingleby goes from a thinly-disguised public school, from which he has visited the local race-course (very thinly disguised indeed), and at which he has been surprisingly influenced by the poet Shenstone (but this, as we have seen is a very genuine touch) to an unmistakable provincial university (Birmingham, in fact), where he studies medicine, takes his degree, falls in calf-love, commits a technical murder whilst under the influence of that passion, and duly fades out to sea, as a ship’s doctor.

These events are narrated straightforwardly, in an unvarying third person with an occasional tributary of reminiscence entering in from an older generation;

and the book may be regarded as the first deliberate prelude to all the symphonic novels which were to lie along the 'North Bromwich' pipe-line—a conception which, I should guess, like all conceptions at once poetic and symbolic, was for a long time working unconsciously.

The city of iron stands upon three hills and its valleys were once watered by two rivers; but since the day when its name was humbly written in Domesday these pastoral features have disappeared, so that the hills are only known as tramway gradients that testify to the excellence of the Corporation's power station, and the rivers running in brick culverts have been deprived not only of their liberty but even of their natural function of receiving a portion of the city's gigantic sewage. The original market of North Bromwich has not been so much debauched from without, in the manner of other growing towns, as organized from within by the development of its own inherent powers for evil. It is not a place from which men have wilfully cast out beauty so much as one from which beauty has vanished in spite of man's pitiful aspirations to preserve it. Indeed, its citizens are objects rather for pity than for reproach, and would be astonished to receive either, for many of them are wealthy, and from their childhood, knowing no better, have believed that wealth is a justification and an apology for every mortal evil from ugliness to original sin.

This is young and very sweeping; the mood soon passes.

In the heart of the city the sense of power, impressive, if malignant, is so overwhelming that one

cannot see the monstrosity as a whole and can almost understand the blindness of its inhabitants. Go, rather, to the hills beyond Halesby, to Uffdown and Pen Beacon, where, with a choice of prospects, one may turn from the dreamy plain of Severn and the cloudy splendours of Silurian hills, to its pillars of cloud by day and its pillars of fire by night; and perhaps in that remote air you may realize the city's true significance as a phenomenon of unconquered if not inevitable disease. If you are a physician, you will realize that this evil has its counterpart in human tissues, where a single cell that differs not at all from other cells and is a natural unit in the organism, may suddenly and, as it seems unreasonably acquire a faculty of monstrous and malignant growth, cleaving and multiplying to the destruction of its fellows—a cell gone mad, to which the ancients gave the name of cancer.

Birmingham, or 'North Bromwich,' and its place in æsthetics as well as in much else, is defined there for all time—in case that should be found necessary hereafter.

Practically all the characters-to-be of the later novels appear in *The Young Physician*, amid a host of minor people minutely drawn. We begin with a prize-worthy selection of schoolmasters, the brand of prescribed partial illiteracy peculiar to the lesser members of the breed being sketched in with enviable lightness of touch:

'(King) Arthur,' said Mr. Leeming impressively, 'has a great and wonderful prototype whom we should all try to imitate no matter how distantly.' Edwin, who had read the dedication (to Tennyson's *Idylls*), wondered why Mr. Leeming lowered his voice like that in speaking of the Prince Consort.

Blessed word 'prototype,' which, like 'protagonist' has a fatal fascination for the solemn ass! And again:

'What is wanted in the public schoolmaster, is a higher sense of seriousness.' Leeming spluttered, 'You have no sense of suspicion.'

Music, which is one of the author's pre-occupations, comes a great deal into the book. This is significant; for music is the most mathematical, as well as the most 'beautiful' of the arts, the art in which a relentless spiritual design is all-important. It is pleasant to know that, along with Bach and Beethoven, the sonatas of Schubert, the greatest unfamiliar master-pieces in the world, helped in the formation of Edwin Ingleby, and so, inferentially, may be supposed to have played a part in his inventor's. An idiosyncratic trick of defining some people's characters by their lack of musical ear, appears first in this book, as does a tendency to describe rooms and their contents with unusual minuteness, a tendency which appears very frequently throughout the novels, sometimes in the shape of a predilection for setting emotional scenes in railway carriages. Like Sainte Beuve, that very different man, Mr. Brett Young has *le gout des intérieurs*. No coroner makes his bow in *The Young Physician*, but he is only just avoided. The improbable streak of violence which seems always to be liable to crop up in the autobiographical, or semi-autobiographical novel (witness *Sinister Street* and *Jude the Obscure*)—as if the soul, impatient at this tinkering betrayal shook itself brusquely—that murderous streak crops up punctually in *The Young Physician*. It is not very well vouched for in the past of the characters, but then violence rarely is.

The autobiographical thread runs on, even becomes more authentic, beyond the end of the book. Mr. Brett Young, in his own person, suffering from the first onsets of the Cyprian, although with less haste and hardship and under auspices less shady, signed on in 1907 as a ship's surgeon on one of the old Blue Funnel liners, of the China Mutual Line, s.s. *Kintuck*, 1,400 tons, and went to Japan. The whole six months' voyage passed like a dream and as easily slipped from recollection. There are not a dozen points in the whole of his work that can be traced back with any confidence to this period. Blanks of the sort, are not so uncommon as they might appear to be in the work of intensely individual writers. The exoticisms of Baudelaire's style might have come as well from a month in the Bibliothèque Nationale as from a trip to the Indies; while, most astonishing of all, one might read nine-tenths of Stendhal and never at the wildest guess realize that he had taken part in an event no less earth-shaking than the retreat from Moscow.

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XIV

'THE TRAGIC BRIDE'

THE TRAGIC BRIDE reverts to the method of *The Dark Tower* and for more than half its course transcends in effect that most effective piece of work. The desired unity, at the beginning, is bestowed and authorized in a more traditional and safer way, and the necessary effect of distance is gained by sheer subjectivity and not by casting conversational light and shade on a prepared scene—by allowing one ruminating mind which has the story imprecisely stretched before it by relays of vague witnesses, without one single definite fact, to speculate and introspect upon deed and thought, incident and motive. It is as though we peered past a lecturing zoological fellow and his impercipient audience, into a hushed, translucent tank, full of dim but lovely monsters.

I never met Gabrielle Hewish. I suppose I should really call her by that name, for her marriage took the colour out of it as surely as if she had entered a nunnery and adopted the frigid and sisterly label of some female saint. Nobody had ever heard of her husband before she married him, and nobody ever heard of Gabrielle afterwards, except those who were acquainted with the story of Arthur Payne, as I was, and, perhaps, a coroner's jury in Devonshire, a county where juries are more than usually slow of apprehension.

So it begins; and afterwards there is hardly a page without its 'I think she must have seen' or its 'probably

she felt,' followed as often as not by some impossibly definite pronouncement such as 'she wondered how on earth she could make her father understand that she couldn't very well go to dinner in the dress that she was wearing.'

The convocation of critics objected to these discrepancies at the time, in their revolving taste, I remember, as their custom and privilege was in those giant days; failing to do Mr. Brett Young the meagre justice to believe that he must have had well-considered, even urgent, reasons for so flouting likelihood. The facts should have been clear even then. It was his intention to make Gabrielle the master-victim of his vision, to confront likelihood and impose upon her all the loveliness that was in his power to bestow. He could allow no clogging of the flesh, there was not time, and yet it was necessary to show every little impulse that darted in her darkening spirit. Her body and soul were required to be fused together and passed on as one whole impression by a comprehending and delicate mind. This effect Mr. Brett Young contrived, with inspired simplicity, by narrating in his own person. There are many internal suggestions that the month in 1919 (the miracle took only a day longer and *Prothalamion* was written in it) during which Gabrielle was created and sentenced, might have been given to the making of a whole book full of new and glittering poems:

She stood in the shadow of a white-thorn, and though she had now ceased from her storm of trembling her body gave a shudder from time to time, like a tree that frees its storm-entangled branches when the wind has fallen.

and the closing passage:

I do not know what has possessed me since I began to write this story. I have grown tired of this river, where the trout are always shy, and more tired than ever of Colonel Hoylake's fishing stories and his obituary reflections. The place is haunted for me by the tragic figure of Gabrielle Hewish. It is strange that I should be affected by the loss of a woman whom I have never seen or known. But I feel that I cannot stay here any longer. Wherever I go in this valley I am troubled by a feeling, as though some bright thing had fallen—a kingfisher, a dragon-fly.

are typical outcrops of the identical stuff of verse. For once the word is the unit.

To attempt to submit Gabrielle Hewish to critical analysis, except by some such instrument as a sonnet-sequence, would be brutal and unavailing. One might as well take ornithologist's opinion on the *Ode to the Nightingale*. It is not that one loves her as one loves Tess Durbeyfield and Diana of the Crossways, she is too elusive for that. Nor is one jealous for her, since her enemies also are elusive. One sees her married, indeed, and unwillingly, and dominated to extinction by her husband; that is her tragedy. But her husband, despite his efficient strength, is so much a shadow among shadows that one cannot flinch at him. One may read the book through with the utmost attention and come away with no better memory of Dr. Consideine than that he was 'a man above the middle height' and that his family came in all probability from Barsetshire. Simply, one knows that as Gabrielle is approached she vanishes. Her father and the other

supernumeraries are painted solidly enough, but she herself is kept exquisitely intangible. For one evening at the very beginning of her destruction, Mr. Brett Young dresses her in white, reveals her contrasting colours just a little, and sends her out into the dusk. The effect of this is like the effect of a crescendo in a Chopin nocturne. It would be another man's *pianissimo*, and yet it gives a complete perspective. *The Tragic Bride* is very likely the nearest approach to a lyrical novel, a single unvarying outcry of story that there has yet been in English fiction. I am not forgetting *Harriet Hume* or *Mrs. Dalloway*.

And yet, and yet. . . . I suppose that, all things considered *The Dark Tower* must still bear the palm for that sort of miniature lyrical perfection. *The Tragic Bride* seems to break into two pieces as soon as ever one gets outside it. The fascination of the theory of psycho-therapy, which has broken so many less noble creations and creatures, undoes it. The incident of the mad boy, which remains almost unremarked in the general twilight of the book, but was the nucleus of its first conception, outweighs it in the full glare of comprehension.

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XV

‘THE BLACK DIAMOND’

IN *The Black Diamond* we make our first descent from the hills past Bewdley into the true Brett Young Country. We descend in the company of a navvy, and remain in his company until he fades in his due turn. For this is Mr. Brett Young's first contribution to the strict chronicle novel of the unremitting realists; and nothing could better display his variety than a comparison of the stern objectivity of this book with the tender subjectivity of its immediate predecessor, or, again, with the other reality of *The Young Physician*. We may remark, I think safely, that there is not a shred of autobiography in *The Black Diamond* except that well-loved places are lingered over.

Abner Fellows is not a hero of the Jack London sort. Although he is a mighty footballer and a great fighter, he has none of the sneaking reverence for Spinoza and Swinburne without which the rough customer so rarely penetrates into literature. Kant has escaped his clear eye; with his sound wind he carols no *lieder*; even our most languorous lady poets would not entice his healthy mind. He is without culture and incapable of it. He has even very little sense of ordinary citizenship, except that there is a vein of quixotry in him, from which he doles out or not, as his incalculable caprice dictates, to the women who buzz round him like a honey-pot. He gets drunk and is involved in the killing of a policeman; but he carries a little girl with a

broken leg, dear old invaluable *dea ex machina*, over the hills home. In fact, despite the drawbacks of his birth and nurture, he is another variation upon the theme of the unpursuable beauty, run to earth and at bay. He is roped into the Army while drunk in a Shrewsbury pub, and that is the end of him.

It is one of Mr. Brett Young's little foibles, (a defensive fancy, common, perhaps to all romantics in this bitter age and particularly to such as seek to transfer the theme of unfortunate Beauty to the world of ethics) to suggest, though ever so remotely, that people who are capable of self-sacrifice—always provided that they externalize it, that they do it for others—are, by virtue of that disposition alone, beautiful and worthy human beings; and it is evidence of his greatest strength—a strength of presentation, not of moral philosophy—that he is able to persuade us that indeed they are; that one good deed, one really good deed, bathes in a beneficent and retrospective light the whole of a degraded or useless career.

*Gloire dans l'univers, dans le temps, à celui
Qui s'imole à jamais pour le salut d'autrui.*

Would that Heaven might instruct the powers of earth to that effect! But, alas, Heaven, like most mortal institutions, expects, indeed, requires to find the ordinary mammalian instincts in man, not to mention erect posture, a competent vascular system, a somewhat heightened intelligence and all the rest of the distinguishing human characteristics—and hopes for rather more from humanity. The doing of good deeds, the neglecting of self for larger, or merely other, loyalties, is a trait found in nearly all mammals, and

in some birds. It is good that a man should lay down his life for his friend; but there is no suspension of the real business of earth on such an occasion, nor any perceptible applause from the eternal abodes. Those most mundane devices, the seismographical instruments, are unmoved. And it is very questionable if the novelist ought to be other than equally unimpressed. If he must applaud, he has always the recourse of inventing, or persuading, other characters to do it for him. Impersonal applause should not leak into his novel. However, Mr. Brett Young can get as nearly away with this as with any other heterodoxy. He is able to make us feel that Heaven is for ever on the point of relenting, or Earth of shaking; and that Heaven does not in fact relent, that Earth is adamant, is, I suppose, in some sense at the root of his vision. This aberration is the Beauty-theme applied to conduct, where it does not suit.

Fellows, then, has the makings of a beautiful character, apt for the window-dressing of a realistic novelist. His features and virtues are cast on sound stereotyped lines. He likes, he loses, and he fades away. He drinks. He cares for dumb animals. He has no ear for music.

The story is told with quick vigour and with a great variety, the greatest up to this time, of puppets and supporters, including two of the nicest old inhabitants imaginable:

‘Now that’s a fine thing to be sure,’ he went on with a glance of admiration, ‘a fine thing to have a clock to tell ’ee when to be going up over, and keep ’ee company night-time. . . .’

is the topmost contribution of one, and of the other :

'Now mark 'ee 'tis like this . . . this country when first I know'd 'en, were a tarrable place for barley and wheat, but now, like the vules they be, they've a'given it up and gone in for this dairyin'. Proper woman's work, I call it: and women be cheap in these parts, as they ought to be. I don't say as there ban't the apples as well.'

Towards the close a certain weariness seems to creep into the story. Mrs. Malpas both has and has not been to see her son in prison. At one moment Abner has no money and, at the next, divine dispensation awards him enough to get drunk on—an expensive business with him, alone among Mr. Brett Young's characters. And within sight of the end some spirit of air presents him with a watch. But, most careless moment of all, and a mockery to thirsty souls, in his pub in Shrewsbury where the recruiting sergeant catches him while he is drowning his accumulated sorrows, 'nobody took much notice of him, for most of the men who had gathered there were regular customers who came in every night.' Of course that is exactly the sort of public-house in which a stranger would be sure to be noticed. But let us be fair to our author in this not unessential English matter. He is aware that the public-houses are closed on Sundays in Wales—a point which steadier drinkers have been known to overlook!

XVI

THE RED KNIGHT

DAY-DREAMS make queer companions. What is there in common, for instance, between Anthony Hope, John Oxenham, H. G. Wells, James Elroy Flecker and Francis Brett Young? Little enough, doubtless; but each has devised at some time in his life and works a private Balkan, or other Mediterranean, state and there stirred up miniature rebellion. Presumably it is in each instance a version left over from early boyhood (overtly in the case of Mr. Wells who is in all other matters so conspicuously adult) of the desire to play with tin soldiers—and tinsel princesses and iron conspirators. And of course if you plant your toy revolution in a real-sounding country, there are always liable to be misunderstandings next time you travel. I am reminded, irresistibly, whenever I read this kind of novel, of Hartley Coleridge, the unalterable child, who had from earliest infancy a complete country, Ejuzrea, furnished in detail, over which he ruled:

‘My people, Derwent, are giving me much pain; they want to go to war.’

The infant Shelley had the instinct, too, before his preternaturally enquiring mind took to chemicals; and once, abruptly and purposively as became him, set a haystack on fire with a view to having a little hell of his own.

Robert Bryden of *The Red Knight* is a fine example of the cockpit hero, as was his father before him. The father, as we have come to expect of elders and minors in these novels, is drawn more sharply than the son:

Being a Victorian he had been born with a social conscience which the mere mention of the word Liberty pricked. Beneath the black frock-coat that he wore tightly buttoned over his chest, his heart was in flames. That very night he sent a wire to the firm, announcing his departure on a 'shooting trip,' selected a modern rifle from the armoury with which the warehouse was protected, paid for it conscientiously in case he or it should be lost, with a cheque on Coutt's Bank, and reported himself in the uniform of an English merchant to the liberator's headquarters.

This character appears again, in all essentials, in *Black Roses*, and lends a touch of credible fantasy to the quite incredible solidity of that story. And Tregaron of *The House Under the Water* is of this race.

A strict plot is imposed upon all the characters, who go woodenly through the required grotesque motions, against the most magnificent cloudscapes that fantasy could invent. We are reminded inevitably of our old improvised games on the floor, in those pre-scientific days before Mr. Wells had co-ordinated such pastimes with a set of rules. Diabolical machinations, as it were, deploy round the foot of the piano-stool, and miraculous volcanic skies are seen behind the fire-screen:

She pointed upward, and Bryden, raising his eyes from hers, saw above them the barrier of the

Pergusan Hills over which the white sirocco was blowing a humid, dazzling sky. Wave after wave it drove on the jagged line of mountains to be broken and thrown up into spouting, spinning pillars of light, leaping into the heaven where the wind caught them again, carding them like wool, tearing them so that they fell more swiftly than they had risen and were dissipated into an endless downward drooping vapour and spun out finely into the shroud that the lower wind coiled about the roofs and towers of Pegusa, throttling the city as in a veil of tears too hotly passionate to be shed. Like the spouting of celestial whales, like the towering wraiths of Titans harried from their vast prisons: exultant, yes, but with an exultation of wrath and terror and destruction! And Maddalena, in the joy of her heart, saw only beauty and nothing of the intimations of doom with which the sky's panoply burdened Bryden's soul. These great gleaming clouds smiled on her happiness. She became a child, and Bryden saw her childishness, which was only proper to her age and her innocence, as something that must be pitied even more than loved. Little by little, her grace, her loveliness, the joy that emanated like a perfume of spring from her young body and her softened eyes, intoxicated him, producing a kind of hallucinated gaiety that seemed curiously in keeping with the haze that made dull the brilliant clarity of the landscape's colour and with that sense of light-headedness which the Pergusan sirocco always gives to strangers. He accepted Maddalena's happiness and his own eager returns as the mind of a man who lies between sleep and waking accepts and prolongs a dream whose existence his conscious intelligence can shatter in a moment.

The taking, highly-coloured woodiness of that prose* suits well with the overwrought tale. Bryden minor would seem childish and tedious in the light of ordinary day, but in this fitful fairy-tale translucence his petty treacheries, frightened crimes and general infantile tricks of demeanour almost become him. There is as much real viciousness in him and in his violent surroundings as in a harlequinade.

But at the end of the book there is another of Mr. Brett Young's sudden redemptions. Reality somehow supervenes. Everybody grows up, all at once, the shootings approach ominously; and under the abnormal stresses of these events the fragile book breaks into a handful of shining fragments which not all the conjurors from Hamley's could fit together again.

In one fragment there is a splendid royal duke (Mr. Brett Young conveys admirably the divinity which hedges the blood-royal—it is the best of tests of the power of conveying atmosphere); in another Bryden kills himself, with dignity and impressiveness, but for reasons which will be quite beyond the power of most readers to understand. Perhaps his unlooked-for and abrupt grown-upness was more than he could bear! I have heard of unexpected promotions having a like effect upon servants of the Crown.

* Mr. Brett Young, who views his cast-off styles with the serenest objectivity, believes that this particular prose manner was the result of his first contact with Norman-Saracen and baroque architecture. *The Red Knight* was written just after a holiday in Sicily with D. H. Lawrence.

XVII

'WOODSMOKE' AND 'PILGRIM'S REST'

WOODSMOKE projects and studies the obsolescent type of soldier in a few exceptionally ridiculous examples. This is the one book of Mr. Brett Young's that has nothing at all to do with Beauty—unless indeed the absolute exclusion, or rather the inversion, of any glimmer of that symbol is itself intended to be symbolic. Perhaps this is Limbo; it is certainly something or other reduced *ad absurdum*. The book is unrelieved by the introduction of a single civilized human being. Here again Mr. Brett Young probably holds a record in fiction. An excellent piece of field-work, but hardly a job for a poet. The scene is laid in Africa, from which continent he was still unable to extricate his imagination.

The arts arrive late in new countries. So, for the matter of that, if the truth must be spoken, do the non-utilitarian sciences. Pioneers, except perhaps the old originals, have little use for flummeries, or even for too much plain ratiocination; and their jackals have none at all. After ten generations or so, with an occasional chocolate-box painter, or expert delineator of mayoral chains, a few inspired story-tellers and babyish poetasters may descend steerage from the Muses, but that is likely to be all for four centuries. If a man of talent does appear by some fluke, he is silent or silenced, or becomes grossly satirical or flies for his life.

But perhaps that is to put the case too leniently; for

the bare fact is that not a dozen first-, second- or third-rate artists in any medium have arisen outside these islands in the whole range and history of our extensive Empire. Indeed, after enumerating Miss Katherine Mansfield (who departed from New Zealand like a flash of greased lightning) and Mr. Roy Campbell (who wrecked, to all artistic intents and purposes, in one glorious rough-house, all his end of his continent) the mind slows up inevitably. For my part, having a blind spot for Miss Schreiner, I should be inclined to put third on the literary imperial list, honorarily as it were, one of the component parts of our many-sided author. He is a mere visitor to Africa, but poets are honorary members of everywhere real.

This particular Brett Young is not primarily a poet but a naturalist with a veterinary eye, and one must suppose that he has the naturalist's peculiar gift of being invisible to the objects of his study. Only this rare and enviable ability could have enabled him to be present at gatherings from which persons with any degree at all of articulateness are in the everyday run automatically excluded; or if detected in disguise, like trippers in old Lhasa, are either poisoned with cock-tails or given over to be bored to death by sporting subalterns. The ordinary sensible man preserves, rebuilt, in the core of his being, a completely equipped child of fourteen, whom he detaches to converse with these people—'Rhodes' Hyænas,' as an eventual Anthropological Gardens might label them. And the child is unreceptive, being untuned to their forms of speech in reply. Not so the artist who happens to be a natural philosopher.

Mr. Brett Young, or this one side of him, has escaped with an unmutated intelligence from these

proconsular seats, as Mr. Rudyard Kipling did long ago, and has indeed brought back with him such rare curiosities as the prologue spoken over the old school tie:

A clumsy overgrown schoolboy, he [Captain Antrim] told himself, and probably quite a decent sort. Women, even exceptional women like Mrs. Kilgour, would always judge by appearances and in a hurry. If the fellow had been in the army and learned to carry himself better he'd be all right. And then, suddenly, he realized that Rawley was wearing an Eton tie. 'Bought it by mistake,' he thought, 'because he liked the colours. Probably knows no better. But his wife might have told him all the same. And yet there must be something in him somewhere. Otherwise she wouldn't have married him. . . .

'Who are they?' he asked at last.

One can almost see his rumination. It has taken him ten minutes to bring his reflections to this vastly serious conversational point.

'Rawley's Chemical Dip. Didn't you know? I thought I told you.'

'No. That accounts for the science and the rest of him. But who was she?'

'She's an "honourable." Her name was Carlyon. A Cornish family. She's a daughter of Lord Pinnock, if that leaves you any the wiser. I'd never heard of him.'

'No. It's strange what a number of obscure peerages there are knocking about. But I think I must have met one of her brothers in Simla. Nothing to boast of, by the way, and a good bit older than this girl.'

'Yes; she's the youngest. I dare say they're a big family. Living down in Cornwall, poor creatures, I suppose they've nothing else to do. Rawley must be a millionaire, to judge by the advertisements.'

'I wish she'd tell him not to wear that Eton tie.'

'He can't help, Jimmy. That's the funny part of it. He's an Etonian. He "let it slip" as they say.'

'Good Lord! You don't say so?'

'In these days, Jimmy, you never know.'

A whole dwarf species is there to the life, male and female, in that short passage, noted dispassionately and eternalized even down to the subtle, if automatic, little compensatory trick they have, these very recent and undeveloped creatures, a trick as startling at first hearing as the innocent mockery of the cockatoo, of likening each other to overgrown schoolboys. It is as well to be reminded that the species actually exists, although not to be reminded too often. 'Beachcomber' at the top of his form could not invent better monstrosities than those displayed to us here and obviously to the life. *Woodsmoke* positively bursts with psychological treasure. Mombasa is a city much like Esher, full of these case-hardened suburbanites, but ever so much more sure of itself. There is Rawley, the most innocuous of them all, who cannot bear to shoot animals, but was in the regular Army for a time and seems to have found it in no way odd to pocket the King's pay for undertaking to shoot men. Hardest and most gem-like of all is the insufferable Captain Antrim, who surmounts his own difficulties, and those of his acquaintances (or, to be fair, of his employers) with the ferocity of a weasel, and surveys the difficulties of the rest of the world with the apathy of a cow:

On the fourth day out from Pembeni Asmani had had trouble with two of the Wagwana who had managed to secrete some bottles of Frangoulis's spirit in their loads. At the morning rally they had been found incapable of work and all through the day they had been driven, like sheep dazed with tiredness, at the donkey's tails. In the evening Asmani had hauled them, completely, into Antrim's presence, and Antrim, thinking of the future and the encouragement of the others, had decreed that Dingaani, whose shoulders and alien race fitted him for the job, should give them ten strokes of the kiboko apiece. All through the inquiry Rawley whose knowledge of Swahili was still in the stage at which Antrim had found it at Mombasa, listened blandly. But when, a few moments later, he heard the whining of the lash and the porters' cries, he had jumped to his feet in violent agitation. 'What is it?' he cried. 'What is it? Good God! What are they doing?'

Antrim explained that the sentence was a matter of discipline; but Rawley could not be re-assured. 'What?' he cried. 'In cold blood?'

A pity, is it not, that one cannot take ties away from outsiders as one takes stripes away from unsuitable corporals? It must be about as exciting to interfere with the smallest comfort of an Antrim as to try to drown a cat. On the other hand, when Captain Antrim catches a Greek or a Rawley, or suchlike, submitting natives to discipline, he bulges twelve feet high with righteous indignation:

'To-morrow I send a report to the governor,' said Antrim. Frangoulis laughed uneasily. 'You don't understand,' he said. 'You are new to the

country. In the absence of Zahn I act as magistrate. This is perfectly legal.' He rubbed his neck. 'These Wagwana are devils. Two pounds of beads were stolen in my absence. My men found them in this woman's hut. The others were merely witnesses. I was performing an act of justice.'

Antrim answered nothing. The whole business made him sick, but he had done all that could be done for the present. He turned away.

This Captain Antrim will shoot to kill if a porter attempts to desert his safari.

In the course of the *Woodsmoke* safari, gold is discovered; and we are promised that the story of the deposit will be taken up in *Pilgrim's Rest*. The promise is delusory. *Pilgrim's Rest* revolves the gold in the minds of its characters but never gets them within a hundred miles of it. These two books make a queerly contrasted pair.*

In *Woodsmoke* there is not one single character, male or female, but bounds in the most thoroughgoing way except the delectable Zulu ghost which is half 'smell of nigger' and half a persuasion as if somebody wanted to explain something. *Pilgrim's Rest* on the other hand, is full of the most exquisitely-limned portraits of genuine human beings. In fact, it is so full of human beings so diverse that we miss our Captain Antrim badly to begin with, accustomed as we have grown to his simplifying ways. For in *Pilgrim's Rest* the unfortunate hero has to deal on equal terms with a number of persons of alien extraction, although now, it is true, no Greeks, ill-born, or Etonians, unsuitably entered. But Captain Antrim, even that iron man, would almost certainly break

* A third volume is still revolving in the author's mind.

down from overwork. For if we have here a true portrait of Johannesburg—and never did the portrait of a township wear more manifestly the radiance of truth upon its simplest feature—then Johannesburg, one of the youngest, is among the most human and cosmopolitan collections of people in the world.

However that may be, at least it serves as a perfect background for the ebbing away of Hayman, who is a gentler version of *The Black Diamond*. Hayman, a miner of the old Kimberley school, is bothered by the passing of the entire scheme of things, by a hatred of the new 'cigarette-smoking generation' and an utter abomination of the new apparatus of Labour, with its Trade Unions and strikes. It can hardly be said of him that he altogether fades out upon all this botheration. On the contrary, he marries after blood-curdling vicissitudes, the girl of his choice, a girl with marked resemblances to Lilian Willis in *The Iron Age*:

Ilma and that young tree were a match for each other. Hayman would have liked to watch them together.

But after *The Dark Tower* and *The Tragic Bride*, the marriages of Mr. Brett Young's major prophets hardly fill us with comfortable anticipations—and even in the more gradual novels, hereafter, this lack of confidence is rarely misplaced. Here we are given one or two sinister touches of Arnold Bennett's marital *expertise*, as if to increase our worries. For example, Hayman is puzzled by his wife's elegance! Can this creature with its airs and graces really be his?

However, we hear the Beauty theme throbbing unmistakably in such bridge-passages, such incidental transitions, as:

. . . When she smiled he saw that her mouth had been beautiful once; that her features, that now were sagged and misshaped, had once been fine and delicately moulded. He had a sudden vision of this pale massive face as that of a young and beautiful girl whom he had seen before. For a second he couldn't place it; and then he saw what he recognized was the fragile beauty of her daughter. An awful revelation!

I have a feeling, a persuasion difficult to substantiate, that, by some symbolic interchange in that cryptic area where these obscure events congregate like penguins in their hyperborean darkness to go through the formality of taking place, the old theme of unhappy Beauty, though never completely lost (we are never quite out of hearing of it in any of the novels, Mercian or other) is at this point already too large and too diffuse to be contained any longer in earthen vessels or mortal exemplars; that, in fact, the newer variations, like those at the end of Beethoven's Diabelli set, are widening out so that the theme, to a casual audience, seems left far behind, in a stellar region, broken into a mist of particles. And so it is with the more delighted recognition that the initiated detect it at last, running it to bay, as it were, in the very depths of consciousness, profoundly abstracted, far below the level of words.

This musical effect—neither of harmony nor of counterpoint, not even of invention, but of pure form—I think we may begin to discern from now on (until perhaps *Jim Redlake*) in the novels. Or so far as words are competent to approach this ineffability, I should say that we are to perceive on the intuitive plane, people, groups of people, generations, villages,

towns, counties, all steeped in hostile Time and suffering the assaults of change.

But however that may be, Johannesburg, revealed to us in *Pilgrim's Rest* as an earthy paradise for the altruistically minded (and that is to say, for the novelist) is yet ineffably kept submerged in an unaltering atmosphere of menace and regret. This is the subtle kind of thing: we get it in our introduction to the town:

But though each [passenger] glanced anxiously at the [great station] clock, whose white face watched them like that of an incorruptible sentinel, their real tyrants were three streaks of grey conglomerate with pebbles of quartzite embedded in their substance, shaped and hidden and denuded by forces long since extinct; an all-powerful trinity: the Main Reef, the South Reef and the Main Reef Leader. . . .

Did ever useful information walk more delicately hand in hand with the business of the novel? Or, to record an instance less subtle but more informative, would Sherlock Holmes himself have guessed that a man may be tracked over the surface of a continent by the nature of the game which he had shot, as recorded day by day in his diary? But then Mr. Brett Young is a great hunter and fisherman before the faintly startled Muses; and to him, personally, as distinguished from the novelist in him, the big game of Africa still calls as powerfully as the denizens of any Herefordshire trout stream. And even for the novelist the glamour is not yet quite allayed. There has already been a great deal of planning and preliminary reading for a novel centring round the Great Trek.

XVIII

‘COLD HARBOUR’

THE subject of *Cold Harbour* is of the new kind, foreshadowed already in parts of *Pilgrim's Rest*, although in technique the book throws back completely to *The Dark Tower*. The abstraction Time is now as noticeable a component as the abstraction Beauty, and the focus of interest is upon entities infinitely remote from human sight. We have now a new side of Man and a new side of the country—new that is to our author, for with them we dip into timeless depths.

Mystics of the order of Richard Jefferies, who seems genuinely to have entered into a sort of time-relationship with a unity in Nature which most of us can only take on trust, work from within outwards as it were, from Earth to Heaven. One has moods of impatience in which one feels how pleasant it would be, if only they were susceptible to argument or to mundane attractions, which of course by hypothesis they are not, to invite their visionary gazes to turn about and consider for our greater profit warmer and more homely regions. It seems a more advantageous direction for a penetrating gaze. There is inward research enough to be undertaken and the matter-of-fact archæologist might very well be spiritually accompanied with riot and singing. But apparently that is not in the mystical curriculum; and, anyhow, mystics are much too difficult a clan to be dictated to by pragmatists.

Beneath the English countryside, with its tilts and crests, its crooked lanes and sweeping roads, its dim-discovered hamlets and its monstrous towns, its brooding and its laughing fields, there lie other evidences and others, a countless merging series, lying packed secretive back to the utter desolation of human pre-history, and then loosely and more loosely approaching the beginning of things. This seems a line of country which should be available for visionary exploration; but so far as I know (unless we are to count Jules Verne) the most inspired archæologists and geologists have given us at the best no more than reconstructions. The spirit of Man came ages ago to a turning of the ways; it is refreshing, if in a sense terrible, to muse back a mile or so along the main road.

Cold Harbour, I should say, is a deliberate self-invitation to some such act of earthy interspection:

... a kind of window opened in the rain, just as if the cloud had been hitched aside like a curtain, and in the space between we saw a landscape that took our breath away. The high ground along which the road ran fell away through a black woody belt, and beyond it, for more miles than you can imagine, lay the whole basin of the Black Country, clear, amazingly clear, with innumerable smoke-stacks rising out of it like the merchant shipping of the world laid up in an estuary at low tide, each chimney flying a great pennant of smoke that blew away eastward on the wind, and the whole scene bleared by the light of a sulphurous sunset. No one need ever tell me again that the Black Country isn't beautiful. In all Shropshire and Radnor we'd seen nothing to touch it for vastness and savagery. And then this apocalyptic

light! It was like a landscape of the end of the world, and, curiously enough, though men had built the chimneys and fired the furnaces that bred the smoke, you felt that the magnificence of the scene owed nothing to them. Its beauty was singularly inhuman and its terror—for it was terrible, you know—elemental. It made me wonder why you people who were born and bred there ever write about anything else.

There, with a couple of judicious metaphors and one hint of paradox, I feel that we are brought very near the source of landscape. But not without labour and, what is worse, not without a touch of the fatigue of labour. For the long-striding prose has lost its ease—perhaps it was impossible that it should not on such a journey; and I think that it just fails of its incanting effect.

But it attempts heroically the most difficult heights of otherness.

So we walked on through a landscape that was like a spoiled photographic plate. We followed the line of the Roman causeway between banks of rusty hazel. The surface of the road had been repaired by a dressing of slag that gave it a feeling of black sterility. The fields that we saw on either side of it, wherever the hedges straggled into gaps, had no greenness in them. They were dotted with mounds of ashes, on which no weeds would grow, and pits of dirty water. No trees but an occasional black and twisted hawthorn. In one field a huge circular boiler of a type that has long been discarded lay on its side like a stranded buoy.

The symbols and emblems are things of the day before yesterday and the obscurity, however owlsh, is only a

combination of fog and Black Country, but there is an evident, shadowy entry of further vistas:

And then, suddenly, Cold Harbour. Although we were prepared for it, it took our breath away. There were only three buildings: the church, with the manor house and the parsonage on either side of it. They stood huddled together, as if for protection, on the brow of the hill, which fell away from them into the basin beneath; and about them, as though to perpetuate the reason for the hamlet's name (Cold Harbour—*Colonia Arborum*), ran a belt of magnificent beeches. All through the Cotswolds, on our drive westward, the beeches had shone like pyramids of flame. On those that surrounded Cold Harbour, not three days later, there was not a leaf. The beeches in Cotswold had trunks that showed a sheen of steel and platinum; the trunks of the Cold Harbour beeches were black and dull as soot. They stood up stark naked and motionless, as though they were dead, a complete circle, dipping over the brim of the ridge like a fairy ring; and as we passed within their circumference it seemed as though we were stepping out of this life and into another of ghostly silence. A fancy of course. As a matter of fact, the deep felting of beech-mast and leaf-mould muffled our footfalls.

It is impossible to admire too much the way in which, if not every word, at least every shred of imagery, is directed towards the desired effect.

The remembered forests of Africa are drawn upon for help. In particular the flabby Godovius is invoked, transposed many intervals up to the much more efficiently sinister Furnival. Each practises the worship of Astarte; but whereas the one is but a lumbering

German acolyte, the other, with a Celtic foreknowledge and an almost Druidal erudition, is deep in the obscenest councils of earth and moon. No unoccult power, perhaps, could keep it up for very long; but it is kept up here, with a growing sense of oppression which by no means hurts the argument, until within sight of the end of the book, if not of its goal. Then and there, under the weight of gathering ineffableness, an unusual thing happens, as presumably it had to happen. The author, who has hitherto performed his greatest prodigies of narrative in surmounting the difficulties at the ends of his stories, gives way, leans hopelessly on the shoulders of—of all people—Captain Antrim, and delivers Cold Harbour and its ghosts over to the flames.

The method of telling is the method of *The Dark Tower*, and it succeeds in contributing numberless small additions of authenticity. There is a long and learned disquisition on the possible effect of such circumstances as the shapes of rooms upon the production of apparitions:

‘Of course it’s possible that the æther at Cold Harbour has an inexhaustible repertory of ancient horrors.’

Again a doctor takes part in the symposium, and again he applies to the slowly forming picture little scientific dabs of reality, such as his ingenious reference to the *petit mal*, the lesser epilepsy, and its queer nervous suspensions and convictions of *déjà vu*. Contributions flow in deviously from persons at the heart of the story. Thus the gentle Mrs. Furnival, the kind of woman that does, even in real life, seem fated to marry that kind of man—so far as one finds him in

real life—maintains in the face of the wildest goings-on, a wonderfully cool patience and abounds in tragically ironical asides:

‘When you have children, particularly in a house like this, you *do* feel that Christmas should be made a festival of brightness, and Mr. Furnival loves all the old customs, too.’

Nothing could be more masterly. And again:

‘I used to go out in the evening with him to look at his roses, and every one of them seemed to me alive—of course they were alive, that’s silly—seemed to be looking at things that were there and that we couldn’t see. Like dogs, you know. Mr. Furnival would never have a dog in the house—and when people brought their dogs here you could see that they hated it.’

The Furnival children are taken over, pretty well unchanged, from *The Turn of the Screw*; but to the master himself, with an easier task before him, and with the avowed intention of being as terrible as he could, it did not occur to invent a source of reference so utterly desolating as Mrs. Furnival.

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III

THE MERCIAN NOVELS

XIX

PLANETARY DEBRIS

THE failures of a conscious and serious artist reveal more from the technical point of view than any but his best successes. He fails when he fails because of some flaw, inherent in the material and not at first to be detected, which becomes manifest as he develops his subject. As he advances, stray ends break loose and gaps begin to yawn. Agonies of alleviation and smoothing joinery ensue; bits of environment are urgently carted in and replanted, half-formed characters, shorn unicorns and nebulous centaurs, are pressed in from other fairylands or failures or from rough drafts and sketches still less advanced; the old originals are submitted to a hypertrophic process and left swelling about to bolster each other up; until at last, with unity and all the desiderated novelistic virtues long ago thrown to the winds, there comes to gather round the gaping pile a piquant Gothic effect. And then, as like as not, coincidence or the supernatural, or both, are invoked in a last effort to make all one; by which time, whatever Herculean labours are expended, the joins show more than ever.

I am not referring now, of course to *Cold Harbour*, that triumphant failure. No flaw developed in that subject. The subject was selected because of the flaw. But there seems to have intervened between *Cold Harbour* and the production of the long, masterly novels which begin with *Portrait of Clare*, a period of

slackening inspiration. *Sea Horses*, *The Key of Life* and *Black Roses** were conceived in this period, straggling indeterminate books with little but their technical interest to recommend them, but obviously all of the same substance, and connected intimately by the quite extraordinary indiscipline of the amatory sentiments in them.

It might have been predicted after *Cold Harbour* (we are now at the end of the year 1925) that Mr. Brett Young's experimental stage was over and that all his straying ends were now neatly tied up. Indeed, it was so predicted, a fact upon which the present writer is peculiarly (if only modestly) qualified to pronounce. It was predicted in August of the year before from pages no less thunderous than those of *The London Mercury*.

At some time, in 1925 by the look of it, Mr. Brett Young began to understand that he had a vocation—and a duty; that he was called upon by the nature of things, and his own physical constitution, to take the Welsh Marches and the Black Country for his frame, and enlarge his brushwork. And the change of rhythm upset him completely.

He seems to have had on hand a novel which *Cold Harbour* had interrupted. This was to have been another experiment, half a sea-story and half a new study of the Godovius type. The beginning of this book, published eventually, with a hurried ending, under the hurried title of *Sea Horses* in 1926, displays a perfect picture of a little group of ship's officers, while its sympathetic Jew trader, and its priggish, competent sea-captain could hardly be improved

* It should be put on record, however, that *Sea Horses* was begun while sitting up in bed in the Anglo-American Hospital at Cairo; and that the two others were written 'with a big dose of streptococcus in my frontal sinuses.'

upon. Captain Glanville has one attribute in common with many of Mr. Brett Young's principal characters. He is not at all likable. He insults everybody to whom he speaks, automatically, with the precision of a mechanical chess-player—and especially older men than himself who happen to be his subordinates; and even when he does loosen up at the end and enter almost into civility, it is for a combination of unusually selfish motives.

Less than half-way through, just as the sea-story part of the book begins to be vexed with problems of the shore, there is an audible buzzing and flurrying and the whole mechanism breaks down. The subsidiary mechanics of Glanville continue to operate, unhinged; the rest turns into a jumble worthy of a marine store dealer. Thus is it ever when a writer whose business is the expounding of character and the solution of characteristic problems, tries to work to a plot, although the collapse is not always so irreparable as here. The gaps have to be filled in, and yet the indignant characters, who want to live their own lives, or at least the lives which they have been led to expect, fiercely resist the attempt to put them in their main stations, let alone any attempt to set them to work on the way. Thus—Captain Glanville has sent for his lady passenger:

Discipline, discipline; the word rang in his head. He had not the least idea of what he was going to say to her, nor how, exactly, he could assert his authority.

Neither had Mr. Brett Young. The monomaniac must exercise his authority, that is clear to them both. What is the purpose of having authority if you don't

exercise it? But neither knows how. The captain has come to a gap in the plot and almost goes on strike against the necessity of saying anything at all.

The prose manner, which was adequate to bear the dead-weight of even the cumbersome content of *Wood-smoke*, breaks down from that moment until the end of the book. Excellent passages occur occasionally; we are dealing with a poet and are travelling in, or to, the tropics. But as a whole the book is dead. Some attempts are made to liven it up with an unnecessary (and certainly highly original) ghost, a hurricane and a mishap on a reef outside the harbour (hence the last-minute title), but it will not rise even to the height of a Godovius. There has flitted for a few brief pages the embryo of one; but he is suddenly slain to make the futile if interesting ghost already referred to.

Sea Horses was finished at Cairo in 1925; and this Egyptian atmosphere, with its attractive archæological side, its apparent but spurious congeniality for sorcerers and its awful popularity with the great reserve of feminine novel readers, made a stronger impression that, on its merits, it deserved to make. Novelists ought to keep away from these overheated regions. I should say that *The Key of Life* was begun as a first casual sketch of the kind of novel to which Mr. Brett Young's inmost being was steadily feeling its way; but that the way was lost, petering out under a North African mirage.

The plot opens on the Shropshire border, and immediately presents us with three most promising country people, Ruth Morgan, aged twenty-three, her farming father, and her sister Diana of an uncertain early middle-age. All are neatly drawn; but this last

portrait must surely provide one of the best in contemporary fiction of the waspish, envious, ageing woman, the most unbearable and yet the most piteous of human creatures. Happily for humanity the type is dying out fast in real life and even faster in fiction. Fiction is curiously averse to depicting envy, although always eager enough to employ the greater potentialities of jealousy.

The farm is well drawn, and there is a fine silent serving-man with a weak head for liquor. (That ale of the Malpas's, which shook even *The Black Diamond* and occasionally devastates a lesser mortal, ought to be worth seeking in these degenerate days.) But with the stage prepared thus for a sort of rough draft of *Portrait of Clare*, suddenly, nidding-nodding as outlandishly as marionettes hung lopsided, they all start enacting a Dell novel of the most tender description. A young excavator, directing the digging on the earth-works, falls sick like clockwork at their door; and to the embittered chorus of the chaste Diana, Ruth nurses him through pneumonia; for which reason he falls in love with her, and she with him. And his lungs, never very strong, require him to take a digging job at Luxor, whither she is to follow him. Which she does; and things begin to happen in a railway-carriage, a milieu where stranger journeys are undertaken than figure in the official time-tables. A tall stranger falls in love with her and she with him. Or is it love or worse? Egypt seems about to force the sinister plant into gaudy blossom. The ancient country sunnily prepares to enter into the old, reconquered dominion of love-enchancements, and furnish forth the flapper once again with gorgeous reverie. But some Shropshire sanity seems to have been imported in this instance.

The young excavator falls ill again with his lungs; and in accordance with the old English custom that persons with lung complaints should forthwith marry, he does indeed, after a great deal of willy-nilly, get her.

The book, lacking the simplifying intervention of ghosts, is full of a welter of discarded symbols—broken Christs, fallen Adonis's, unrisen Ra's and a troop of such apprentice hobgoblins. If we neglect the first few chapters, which are excellent but lack individuality (they are not kept up long enough for it), the best that can be said about it at the end is that it faintly resembles a 'popular' rendering of the 'plot' of *The Dark Tower*; almost as if somebody's decent alto tune had been given over for execution to one of those ephebes who whimper for their mummies amidst the saxophones—let us say: 'Thy mercy show, O God,' out of the Matthew Passion since the almost astronomical pity of that aria recurs like a leit-motif in *The Dark Tower*, and runs in the fanciful reader's head thereafter from time to time through passages in most of the other novels.

Black Roses, which was begun in that same unpropitious year of 1925, is hardly on all fours with these two comparative disasters. It may even, for all I know, be proved to succeed with a majority of hardened readers. By which I mean that it may carry out its author's intention perfectly well, for technically speaking it is an immense improvement on its two contemporaries. For one thing it is all in one piece. For another it contains no idle symbols—and nothing in art is so offensive as symbolic waste. The serious objection to the book is that the story, through aiming too consciously at the reverse effect, succeeds in becoming thoroughly ignoble. This would not matter

of course (it might well be designed) were it not that from that moment the book begins to hum with the old subdued note of approval. It vibrates throughout with that singular murmur of approving surprise which Mr. Brett Young so often seems to produce when his people do ordinarily decent things with a spice of risk, or of renunciation, about them. And it is hard to give credence to the incidental mechanisms, the selling of the painted boxes (though this is in all probability a memory of the D. H. Lawrences who painted boxes) and of the illuminated manuscript, particularly. The fact is that Mr. Brett Young is a novelist with too much of the vitality of growth in him to work to a 'plot.' His characters rebel in the first place, and either wreck the novel by having to be propped up and underpinned everlastingly, or else die on his hands, leaving him with three-quarters of his story to be told and only a handful of ghosts to draw upon.

But the prose in this book holds together, and breaks at times into hints of the coming regular excellence :

A bare room, long and barrel-vaulted, with a bed, a trestle table, and one chair. It was dark as a cellar; for the window that occupied the end of the cylinder was closed and shuttered, and yet it smelt clean and dry. The woman passed before them, throwing open shutters and window, admitting a flood of air and light which poured in like a torrent that has burst into sluices, blinding their sight, searching the lime-washed walls, making a watchful spider contract its legs. On the flood of his white magnificence Paul's heart was tossed upward like a feather out of the depths into which the house's empty glooms had sunk it.

Perhaps that is about as near as it is possible to get to Rembrandt in words. The prose throughout is, in fact, even more highly sensitized than usual, if less steady and consistent. Is not this, for example, exactly how a child feels when he hears his mother crying—although not every child has a flight of bats to symbolize it all?

That evening, endlessly, as it seemed, the hot debate continued in the druggist's shop. He heard his father's voice, raised passionately, overbearing the quicker, more rapid tones of his uncle Andrea. At one time it seemed as if the two friends were quarrelling. His mother went down and joined them. He heard her protests added to Andrea's; and then, with a cold stab at the heart, knew that she was crying. A sense of something enormous, disastrous, rose up like a poisonous gas and filled the room's dim silence with dread. Bats came out, flickering through the tepid air that bathed the plane-trees. Not daring to go downstairs, Paul stayed there, bewildered and nearly sick with hunger. It seemed that everyone but himself had forgotten all about supper.

The proximity of the great mass of Jupiter prevented what is now the belt of asteroids from forming into a planet. So we may assume that the impending Mercian novels have prevented the true formation of these three books.

It would be convenient to apply the same analogy to the short stories, collected in *The Cage Bird* in 1933, but, alas (if one may say so) many of these stories are perfect examples of the *conte*. They certainly bear traces, most of them, of deriving from the stuff of this or that one of the greater novels, but

in nearly every one the fragmentary substance is thoroughly full of life of its own and has been worked into a complete entity—an entity often more complete than the novel from which it seems to derive. Thus in *Shellis's Reef* the ship's officers might well be foster-brothers to those in *Sea Horses*; but in the short story they work to some purpose and with surprising economy, in gravely recounting the 'old man's' monomania, or in unwittingly assisting it to his downfall. *Glamour*, again, might be *The Key of Life* laughing itself into wholesomeness. A ludicrous outbreak of adoration of just the same texture as the filmy nonsense of Ruth Morgan is again wafted about in the arid and transparent airs of Egypt, but in the short story it is allowed value for exactly what it is. The result is a piece of narration which goes deep and is a triumph of irony:

In Italy, as I say, Miss Jenkins and Agatha, her niece, acquired the romantic habit. Miss Jenkins was a middle-aged body, determined but rather stupid. She had read Mr. Wells's *Outline of History* from cover to cover three times. Each time she finished it she said, 'Dear me!' and sighed, and began again. Agatha, on the other hand, was clever and pretty in an angular way, with fair hair, good teeth, irreproachable ankles. The aunt had once lost a lover and was therefore sentimental. Agatha had recently found one, and left him in cold storage at Chicago. His name was Simeon Jackson. He dealt in real estate. He used to send long type-written letters every week; and she, with the help of her diary and a Baedeker, replied with a postal course of European culture as a preparation for matrimony. He had proposed to her three months before she left New York, begging her to marry him

before she sailed for Europe, and she had promised to do so on her return.

Nothing so far had shaken this resolve; not even that Sicilian barone at Sorrento.

Notice the new, but temporary, prose style, with its staccato and rapidity; not capable of any high flights but excellently adjusted to describe the meetings of young girls with the Sheikh or Sheikh-substitute.

But the new adjustable prose is seen at its best—and the *genre* of humorous-sentimental short story, one might make so bold as to say, not far from it—in the wholly delightful, gloriously high-spirited *Mr. Walcot Goes Home*. Mr. Ludlow Walcot (of Walcot's world-famed Antacid, don't you know) visits England for the first time in middle age, falls in love with the ancestral Walcot, near Ludlow, and with a fortieth cousin whom he marries. This is Mr. Walcot:

The clerk in the tourist-office had given him a detailed description of the road from London to Oxford with a little sketch-map on which he had marked all the main points of interest. That road, he had explained, was one of the grand old coaching highways and bristled with history. As far as Mr. Walcot was concerned it might just as well have been brand new. When once the fish-van had abandoned him and he had dared, in the thinning traffic, to change up to 'second,' his hands, his feet, his eyes, his whole mental and physical organization were grimly concentrated on compelling himself to drive on the wrong side of the road. It violated his reason and all his better instincts to keep to the left and overtake on the right. Not that Mr. Walcot was in danger of overtaking anything; no power on earth could have persuaded him to change up again into

'top'; but whenever he saw another vehicle approaching, the sense of being where he had no right to be so oppressed him that he stalled his engine—with the result that when, six hours later, and with a boiling radiator, he crawled into Oxford, having covered the distance at a pace of ten miles an hour, he felt like a racing motorist emerging from a speed-trial on Daytona beach, and had no more idea of what rural England looked like than when he started.

Mr. Walcot, not unnaturally, meets with a motor accident, by favour of which it is that he is taken to the home of his forefathers—a conjuration of Fortune which one does not object to among the farcical and economical delights surrounding it. The girl who owns Walcot, that unhurt specimen of Tudor farmstead, refuses to sell, of course but, equally of course, accepts Ludlow's proposal of marriage, provided he undertakes not to spoil the old building with too many bathrooms and telephones.

He agrees, demanding in return that she shall return with him to New York for a year so that he may clear up grandly before settling down in Shropshire. And so it comes about:

Next summer, unfortunately, the pressure of expanding business made it impossible for Mr. and Mrs. Ludlow Walcot to visit Europe. Quite apart from the pressure of business they would have felt it unwise to leave the summer residence which they had begun to build on Long Island. It is a fascinating little place, the exact replica (according to *Homes and Gardens*) of an Old English Farmhouse. It has sixteen bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, a squash-racquet court, a picture gallery, a Pompeian swim-

ming-pool, and Dutch and Italian Gardens. The name of the house as carved on the Indiana limestone gateway is simply 'Walcot'

'A sentimental fancy of my wife's,' says the Imaginative Realist.

It may be the place here to notice a handful of miscellaneous essays on such people as Pirandello, D. H. Lawrence, and the writers of South Africa; such controversial excursions as a reply to Mr. Compton Mackenzie; and two plays, *Captain Swing*, an early melodrama on the machine-breakers of the industrial revolution, and *The Furnace*, a dramatization of *The Iron Age*. There were also, before the War, some really admirable musical settings of poems by Trench and Bridges. But Mr. Brett Young is too strongly individual and creative to be notable as critic or controversialist and has not the gifts of niggling of the dramatist born; and all this miscellanea, including the music, is out of print and beyond the scope of this study. The songs were published in Germany just before the War, and the plates were doubtless made into bullets.

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MR. AND MRS. BRETT YOUNG ON THE PORCH OF CRAYCOMBE HOUSE

XX

‘PORTRAIT OF CLARE’

THE lyrical impulse soon fades in Man. At least, so we are insistently told by every kind of authority, except the poets: and if by lyrical impulse we are supposed to understand the flaming, uncritical desire to make memoranda, as rich in feeling as grammar will allow, generalizing the events of youth and glorifying the shapes of one's particular friends, presumably the fact must be taken as incontrovertible. It is implied, in that case, in the definition. The axiom, however, is often cited as if to show that poetry itself, with all its equipment, tends to depart from the human organism within a few years of puberty. ‘One's feelings lose poetic flow, soon after twenty-seven or so.’ I have heard that no less considerable a judge than ‘Q,’ well-drenched in the waters of Helicon, quotes that piece of doggerel with approval in literary-historical lectures to his impressionable undergraduates. Yet as against the handful of real poets of whom it holds good, with Coleridge and Wordsworth, and let us allow them Collins, easily at their head (for there were no signs of the stemming of the tide in Keats and Shelley at the time they died—rather are there signs that they had scarcely begun), against this handful twice as many can be produced applied to whom it makes simple nonsense—including Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Dante, Donne, and a score of other universal names, a very much weightier collection.

What does happen soon after twenty-seven or so is a shifting of focus, perhaps even a change of values. Instead of one's individual affairs being felt to be the most exciting components of the business of the world, an altogether reverse action begins. One slides from the giddy rim towards the hub of things. The general becomes the centre of interest; and the particular amuses only so far as it ministers to the life of the whole. A poet's work, provided that he continues with it under the shocks of alteration, becomes, in fact, not different in kind but larger, more copious, saner and, on that basis, more shapely. In music, pattern of all the arts, the evolutionary process is plain in this matter, as in all, though still hard to express in words. Nocturnes, fantasias, sets of variations, even sonatas, may proceed in a masterly flow from infant musicians, fainting under their love-locks and bows and sailor-collars; but the opus number of a symphony of any moment is very rarely lower than the thirties.

There is no mistaking this change of focus in the work of Mr. Francis Brett Young. At some time between 1925 and 1926 he leapt at one bound into creative maturity. After those years we do not find again the lyrical tone of *The Tragic Bride* and *The Dark Tower*, the excited diffusion and dispersal of poignant individual events, the terrific miniature concentration of intensity; but we find a steady comfortable unravelling and tangling of ordinary lives, going on before a broad sweet landscape which brims over with the four seasons, with midsummer hum and midwinter hush—or else before a local Black Country darkness, but with the English landscape and climate, visible and tangible away in the background.

There is more than a hint of Gabrielle Hewish in

Clare and her fate; or rather her fates, for she lasts a great deal longer and evinces a strong dislike for knuckling under at the first or second challenge. Their first lovers are almost identifiably the same young sportsman; and their second lovers are very similar pompous solemnities. Only their third lovers differ noticeably. Gabrielle's madman is the end of her; but there seems to be no reason why Clare should not stand up pluckily for at least a while, her tatters mended, to her somewhat callow colonel, and every indication that it is her intention to.

We see Clare from quite near the cradle until her approach to what we are assured, by all the power that moves between the lines, will prove to be a happy marriage at last; and although the soul suffocates in her early, she keeps admirably fit otherwise. In toughness it is, indeed, that the two girls most differ—in that and in the manner of their presentation. Gabrielle's frailty is exhibited like a cherished vase, and in the end is wrapped away, as it were, in black velvet. Clare is like a half-wild garden flower, perhaps a runaway pansy, or perhaps like a good hearty butterfly.

The ease with which *Portrait of Clare* develops in comparison with even so competent a piece of work as *The Black Diamond* is, it is clear, not to any great extent the effect of deliberation on the author's part. It recalls far more readily a biological metamorphosis—say the swift unpacking of a seed, or the change from an excellent if fantastic caterpillar to a radiant (but large and perfectly healthy and normal) member of the daylight lepidoptera. There has been a long preparation and now there is a rapid emergence.

It is not for a moment conceivable that Mr. Brett Young shut his odds and ends of composition away in

their drawer, drew bolt and addressed himself to the composition of an unbroken series of masterpieces. There can be no question I think, when one notes (to extend, and not too much to mix, the metaphor) how the soil had lain exactly fallow so long for their cultivation, that they entered his head subtly, secretly perhaps, but ponderously like a thicket of oaks transplanted overnight, and took serene possession. The characters grow with the superbest simplicity, closely watched and more closely encircled all the while by a jealous world of older undergrowth.

In form, *Portrait of Clare* is what Mr. Percy Lubbock, in his formal ecstasy, would probably call the shape of an hour-glass, a form which it is not stretching images so very far to compare with the sonata-form, since it depends upon the orderly progression and return of themes as do the first movements of sonatas and symphonies. No lengthy elaboration of the parallel seems called for, as there is a manifest but pleasant suggestion of strict formality about the design of the book which on closer examination does indeed resolve itself into (a) announcement of the main theme, (b) announcement of a second, a shorter contrasting theme, (c) a period of working-out, of free fantasia, in fresh keys, involving a great deal of mixing up of the two themes, and the introduction of new material; and (d) a return to (a).

The main theme is, of course, Clare herself, and it is announced at considerable length, with intuitive care never quite to define her. It is one of the canons of the musical art not to exhaust one's themes too soon. The melody which accompanies her is throughout of the greatest tonal, or verbal beauty. The second and contrasting theme is her son, Steven, whose accompanying

music is simple unharmonized melody, wiry, unaffected, unpromising and charming in the way that a puppy is charming—all legs and eyes and gruffness. The two themes are announced in the first third of the book, which narrates Clare's first marriage and ends with her Hingston husband's death in the Boer War. If it were not for one most moving recapitulation of his influence at the end of the book this first lover would be without thematic importance. One has a glimpse of a manly profile and a sporting nature, and he is gone. He is an episode and an echo.

The free fantasia period, after a few unrelated incidentals which are to reappear continually until they almost form a pattern of their own, consists in the confused marriage with Dudley Wilburn, the North Bromwich solicitor, and his lingering incompatibility with Steven. We have been in the habit of seeing Wilburn on and off throughout the novels, but this is our first 'close-up.' He is a sound lawyer, finely studied, with a showy house in a suburb. The impression is one of respectable and dangerous squalor, as though our butterfly, with wet wings, had drifted over a morass.

The recapitulation section is the return to first love all over again, the girlish adoration of the upright soldier, an excellent and likable man, drawn full-length, and true to type, untroubled by complications except by such as are immediately soluble, but standing like rock through them when they are, and avoiding them when they are not with a decent avoidance. And nearly at the end of it all, in a cleverly invented *coda*, we rocket right back to the first announcement and establish a semblance of freshness for the old, altered theme:

'He was only a boy,' she said softly. 'I think he was younger in most things than Steven is now.'

'But you loved him, didn't you?'

'I don't know.' The monstrous word was spoken. 'I suppose I did. I think I was too young myself to know the meaning of love then.'

What was she saying? What treachery was this?

Her eyes met Hart's [the soldier-lover] in a long look that frightened her.

A device so daring, almost so self-contradictory, is not to be found except in the work of the finished commander of men's hearts, of the expert craftsman in emotional presentation. Such moments become increasingly more frequent in our author from this time forward. Here it is very easily missed, but its lack of preparation is in itself a significant and poignant touch. It is the great moment of the book and crystallizes it as does a grain of salt falling into a super-saturated solution.

In the intervals between the exposition, elaboration and interweaving of these main themes, other motifs, already not unfamiliar, put in brief appearances. Of these the most noteworthy is Aunt Cathie, the true belated spinster of the Victorian era, trained in patience and now exemplary in hopelessness, not waspish but just a shade tight-lipped, not noble in outward seeming but of exceeding worth and worship underneath, and always insistent upon being worthy with the most histrionic degree of modest stealth which can be wrung from the given situation. The story of her long degeneration is packed with heartrending dexterity into the first chapter. Mr. Brett Young is fond of using the type as a sort of auxiliary of Time. It exists still among us in the flesh, although it is dying out with

the decay of the kinds of reticence and irrational regulated modesty upon which it thrives. The type is here made eternal.

This is Aunt Cathie in those circumstances where bluffs are normally called—upon her death-bed, an adorable foolish figure. The passage contains the last few strokes of one of Mr. Brett Young's best feminine portraits:

As time went on she became more and more pathetically anxious for Clare's company, and would call her to account for the hours she spent away from her, with something of the doctor's old impatience; but when Clare came to her, as often as not the energy of that impatience had spent itself, so that she lay back on her pillows exhausted, assuring herself of Clare's presence from time to time by a lazy opening of her eyes, whose black pupils were now contracted to pin-points by the beneficent drug. And Clare, sitting silently by the window, listening to the tender courting songs of thrush and willow-wren would feel, as she smiled to meet Aunt Cathie's glances, an effable sadness which crushed, at the very moment of its birth, the joy of spring. Death—coming nearer and nearer, quietly, like a creeping shadow. . . .

Observe the ideal musical balance of all this, the exact cadences, and now the modulation, neat and telling, into violent necrology:

If that were all! But death in so ghastly a guise! For now those cells gone mad were mastering the wasted tissues, rioting, proliferating in Aunt Cathie's virgin body with a strength that seemed more appropriate to generation and birth than to decay

and death. And now the growth, once stony, exfoliated like a foul flower. There came a new horror of soaked dressings: blood and corruption. A nurse's work. . . . But Aunt Cathie wouldn't hear of nurses. Clare was the doctor's grand-daughter: no excuse for squeamishness! And while Clare shuddered and went pale with nausea, Aunt Cathie contemplated the evil monstrosity with a bland disinterest.

'I think it looks like closing at last,' she would say. 'The doctor always said I had wonderful flesh to heal.'

It is magnificent: and yet, again the attentive ear remarks a hum of distant, sedate applause. Are reticence and modesty played out, as is the Caucasian? Or are the ghosts of the War already engaged in thinly disarming us all, as a pattern and a preparation for the empanoplied entry of Disarmament? What a drastic commentary it is on the march of civilization that this most English and observant of novelists (and of doctors) should find so few opportunities to record what we are taught to consider the most English of virtues—courage in adversity, or even sudden pluck—and so many temptations to expatiate on them when found. Only in his old doctors and old maids do we find these ancient husky English attributes in any perceptible quantity; and, even then, the quality, whichever it is, is usually transmitted with a touch of play-acting, as in Aunt Cathie. His youths are honest boys enough, quick to forego their own advantage for the hypothetical advantage of others, but that is a very different thing.

We might have expected the War, at all events, to have reinstated us to ourselves. But the disposition is

quite otherwise. This gratitude for the least show of English spirits is widespread and distressingly significant. Thus, even Mrs. Woolf, who feels so acutely and so accurately, finds it in her heart to commend Swift's Stella for her *courage* in shooting a robber who came to her window. As though it was ever, under any code of manners till now, a *courageous* act to let off a gun in circumstances which ensure one nothing but approval from the world and the law; and from posterity. Commendable it certainly is. Determination is shown, perhaps even a magnificent overcoming of fastidious scruples—but courage! Shades of Smollett, Sterne—and Swift himself! Let us draw a veil.

Another excellently chosen contrasting motif, expertly composed and most exquisitely introduced—and resolved—is in Ernest Wilburn, the brother of Clare's second husband, who forms, although also a North Bromwich lawyer, a complete contrast to him. Ernest Wilburn's appearance in the centre of things is brief, but he performs the essential service of clearing off marriage the second and preparing the way for marriage the third, and provides the opportunity for a new and exceptional musical note. He represents the intelligent, cultivated, successful business-man type, a rare bird indeed, which we Londoners expect the Midlands and Birmingham to produce in uncommon numbers until we visit Birmingham and the Midlands. He is the kind of man who can say: 'Joyce is a queer girl . . . her admirations and enthusiasms seem to be born by a process of parthenogenesis,' and get away with it. He is drawn with a few quick, clear strokes, all converging, unbeknown to his acquaintances, upon his suicide. Silence is an ingredient in music which adroit composers know well how to use.

Our musical allegory, it may well be considered, has already given signs of exhaustion and can hardly be urged further. Of bridge-passages, therefore, we will speak no word, except to mention, with mute apology, that there is Clare's piano-playing with a great deal of reverberation around it; and that the church and its religious exercises weave a faint fantastic pattern of their own over and about the theme of Clare. Such artifices escape exact musical comparison, they are so essentially of the novel. Nevertheless we ought not to neglect to notice a number of important isolated incidents, introductory to this or that stage of the story, which modify those and each other in a highly musical manner. I have quoted the death-bed scene of Aunt Cathie, which is full of these repercussions. The death of her father, seen less centrally, is introduced with a Hardy-esque scene in a belfry (at one stage in its composition, it is interesting to know, the title of the book was to be *The Belfry*):

A rope tautened and scraped the hole in the oak floor through which it passed, communicating its movement to the mountings of the great bass bell whose inscription he had read last. There followed a groan of old wood in distress as the giant began to swing on its oak hanging, and then, as the clapper smote its concave bronze, a volume of sound so monstrous that it seemed as though their ear-drums must give way. In that small chamber there was no room for anything but these cruel vibrations. They broke forth angrily, then swooped, swerved, hovered, searching each corner of the belfry for some living thing whose senses they might over-power.

Clare and Ralph stood deafened among these stormy waves of sound. A ringing practice, she

thought at first. She pictured Mr. Hemus and his ringers below, each man standing to his woolly rope. If one bell were so monstrous, a practice would be hell let loose in that restricted space. But when the last pulsation had died down to a meditative hum, like that of a great tuning-fork, there was silence for a moment. Then, suddenly, the rasping and creaking began again. The bass bell swung. Once more the belfry was filled with a torment of sound.

'I can't stand this,' Ralph shouted. 'Come along.' She saw his lips shape the words and followed him. The echoes pursued them malignantly down the spiral steps. He had been speaking and laughing all the time. Now of a sudden his voice became audible: 'It's a passing-bell,' he was saying. 'I suppose some poor devil's dead.'

So it is that English phrases should accommodate themselves to the most English of sounds. And here, for comparison, are the same bells, unladen with forebodings:

Their voices made an airy maze, soaring and wheeling dizzily above the steeple like swifts on a summer evening, while beneath them in the quivering heat-haze that wrapped the Severn Plain, the bells of other villages hummed, throbbed and trembled like a bourdon of bumblebees in the lime-blossom.

But perhaps the most melodious motif of all is the continually recurring note of Clare's personal relations with her houses. One might call it the leitmotif of her first marriage. Here are two of its entries:

. . . As the first weeks went by it seemed to her as if the spirit of the house had actually taken her in

hand, and set about moulding her to the shape of its sober dignity. She had thought of it at first as her creation. In a little while she began to wonder if her new self were not created by it, so gracious and well-proportioned, so foreign to all her old ideas, was the influence that it shed in her. At times she would actually see it as a personality, setting its spiritual seal upon the living things that had grown up about it. . . . In this anthropomorphic reverence she would treat its unspoken judgements as oracles, anxiously waiting on its mute approvals and disapprovals, applying them as a touchstone to matters of everyday life.

and here, after two catastrophies, she revisits the house that she was born in :

On the brow of the hill the doctor's Wellingtoniaspires shot up into the sky. The drive gate swung and clicked as it had on nights when Ralph had stood and watched her shadow disappearing. Now that old Jabez pruned them no more, laurels and lilacs narrowed the little drive ; its surface, no longer worn by the victoria's wheels was overgrown and softened by damp-smelling moss ; but the window of the dining-room, yellow with lamplight, beamed, as before, its placid welcome. It was as though, through all those years, the low-browed house had been asleep and waiting her return.

Notice the symbolic addition of three dead men. But Mr. Brett Young's houses have always a suspicion of vegetable vitality about them. So, too, have his rooms—as, oddly enough (perhaps for the formal value of their detached motion), have his railway-carriages. And here is the North Bromwich lawyer's house of the second marriage :

. . . That dreadful drawing-room. . . .

After the light and spacious dryness of Annabel Ombersley's room at Uffdown, she found it more than she could bear. For though, at night, with a crackle of fire and the gas-jets of the chandelier lit, its discomforts seemed more tolerable, by day, when the dank north light filtered past straggling ivy and green repp curtains over the filaments of an overgrown asparagus-fern which blocked the remaining window-space like a tuft of seaweed, motionless in subaqueous gloom, this room, with its dim wreckage of late-Victorian furniture, seemed fitter for the habitation of aquarium specimens than of human beings. During his widowhood, Dudley told her, it had never been used except for callers. Now, since the idea of sitting in the odour of a finished meal was repugnant to her, she had determined to make a job of it.

'This morning,' she said, 'I want you to turn out the drawing-room.'

I am prepared to swear, by the way, that those sentences could never have been written if it had not been for the influence of Proust.

Other small motifs that connect up with other novels are: the 1897 Jubilee beacon-chain—lately reproduced; the incidents surrounding the playing of the piano; of course, the pipe-line; and an occasional visiting principal character from another book such as Mr. Furnival of *Cold Harbour*, who makes a noteworthy appearance at the dinner-table with his brave and unhappy wife.

Portrait of Clare is full of death, whether of the spirit or of the body; and yet the tone is so quiet that one must listen and watch with the closest care punctually to detect the spiritual agonies. Let me set a problem.

Besides that one physical death-scene I have already quoted in the last few pages one moment of sudden spiritual death. It needs looking for! Probably it is undiscoverable without the book.

Everybody in the foreground of the novel dies in some sense somewhere through its course save only a few tough parvenus and the inextinguishable military gentlemen, of whom indeed, whatever may be the truth about veterans of the rank and file, it does seem predicable that they will never die. These survive, these mastodons, as do the grocer-nobility and brewer-gentry—a sad constellation; but Clare is for the dark and so is all else that shone in her train.

The low tone and pervading beauty of the book has curiously misled all its critics (including the present writer on first and second acquaintance) over some of its details—and over one essential. This last is the fact that until Clare settles in her final house in Shropshire it only twice takes us, and then only briefly, into really deep English country. There is so constant a persuasion of mellowing sunlight and growing rains that we hardly realize how, but for those two not very cheerful excursions, and for a brief honeymoon in Capri and a sojourn among hutments on Salisbury Plain, we have not left the smoke-belt of the Black Country.

No more unconscious or better tribute could be paid to the power of Mr. Brett Young's presentation; for when one comes to look closely at all this summer luxury and winter rigour every single stir of it is found to be wrung, kaleidoscopically, out of the childhood's mountain of 'Uffdown,' or Walton Hill, an excellent eminence and an unexpected in that country, which looks clean out into Wales, with all

its foliage, grass and gorse slightly withered on one side where the smoke strikes it. The hill is sound enough. There is a simple dignity, about its gentle contour which not a thousand picnic parties, held in general fellowship, can hurt; nevertheless nobody who has not spent an eager childhood in communion with the hill will understand its towering fascination for Mr. Brett Young, suggestive upheaval though it must be, even for the late-comer. But in his books we have what amounts almost to an absolute act of geology, to a physiographical intervention, the building up of an ideal Walton Hill, the hill as it would wish to know itself. Truly the poet is blessed, with his mirror held up to Nature and his power of charming Nature to forgo her wrinkles, dear-won, to soften and glow and grow more beautiful to human eyes in his reflection!

Without having access to any kind of complete record, if there is any, I think it safe to say that *Portrait of Clare* contests with Mr. Baring's *C* the distinction of being the herald of our post-War spate of long novels. And with that very different book, and perhaps with *The House Under The Water*, many may think that it has the right to contest pride of place among them so far, in efficiency of general workmanship and power of characterization. In power of idyllic poetry it stands alone.

It was also his first real commercial success—to which somewhat indelicate fact it will, alas, be a critical necessity once to return. These little things are not, cannot be, without their effect on the artist.

XXI

FAREWELL TO EUTERPE

LET us pause here, on the foothills of the Mercian novels, for an explanation, an apology and an undertaking.

All parallels between the arts, fascinating as they are, may easily be overdriven, especially that most attractive of them, the parallel between music and prose, for which we have the authority, in precept and practice, of Walter Pater—and even when it suggests itself in critical enquiries like the present, in which the subject is an author who is a deliberate and declared musician, whose instincts are all for formal shapeliness, whose mind proceeds musically, and whose writing is, in its general outline, continually under the correction of an exact ear. And from this stage it will become practically unusable. Yet we must not be ungrateful. It has served its turn not inaccurately up to the present; and if the necessity for beginning to abandon it now becomes clear, that is in itself significant of a change in the texture of the novels.

Music is at once the most abstract and the most formal of the arts, and it is fatally easy to refer to its discipline almost any of the less utilitarian practices of the mind. One first begins to be aware of impending trouble, as in most of these extended logical fallacies, when one pursues analogies too closely in the direction of technical phraseology; and in this particular matter one gets unpleasantly stuck over the word 'theme.' With whatever dexterity or violence, one cannot for

long keep up the pretence that the theme of a piece of music is the same sort of thing as the theme of a novel. In the first place no piece of music is 'about' any kind of large synthetic idea; so far as it is about any idea at all, except simple acoustical statements, it is simply about synthesis. Thus, one finds oneself constantly tending to claim that the principal theme of *Portrait of Clare*, as of most of its predecessors, is the lingering decay of Beauty. But in that sense there are no true musical parallels, unless, in doubtful company with the annotators of programmes, we profess such far-reaching imaginative insight as to find that works of the middle period of Beethoven are 'about' Destiny (except, of course, for Opus 27 No. 2 and Opus 57, which are 'about' passionate love, and Opus 68 which is 'about' love of the country), or, more particularly, that this or that prelude of Chopin is 'about' his debatable relations with George Sand—and so grow to forget, in the glow of cataloguing, that music is music; that that is all we need to know about it, and all we are likely to; that it is essentially the supra-logical expansion of ideas too far away at the back of things for thought's petty exactitudes to reach and define. For this reason it may be that it is almost impossible not to drift in fluffiness the moment one begins to speak about it. And perhaps that is also why one is always reluctant to leave it for the naked vulnerability of words!

So it happens that, when the novel is a novel of characters and development of characters, one may proceed surprisingly far with one's apparently happy parallel. For music *is* development. One falls in upon a well-used highway, with all the aspect of leading somewhere, and only pleasantly undulating.

The themes may then be explained as the people of the story and what they stand for; their entanglements, which stray of themselves, as it were, into a kind of pattern, not preconceived, will then be found to fall often into a vital rhythm, full of recapitulations in changing keys, of new characteristics merging into the old, of bridge-passages and summary *codas*. On lines of that sort the parallels can be traced astonishingly far. It is when the novel is worked out to a preconceived plot, however, that such parallels become too free and easy, too altogether non-Euclidian, for words to fit them. Then the critic with musical leanings might perhaps play string-quartets over them, as Sir Walter Raleigh used to do over his prettiest piratical conceptions, but it is no longer anything more than a dilettante self-indulgence to talk string-quartets. And, if not to 'plots,' still to distant analogues of plots, Mr. Brett Young from this point onwards begins to work.

But only at a distance and at a stretch of terminology. His concern with life is too dynamic and far too resolutely bent upon growth and the reverse of growth, with development and dilapidation, with the process of the seasons on the green and brown earth and in the ebbing heart of man, for ready-made plots, as ordinarily understood, ever much to invite him. Except in a few short stories, and the three truncated novels which partly preceded *Portrait of Clare*, his characters hardly give the reader the necessary lugubrious impression of having been wound up and adjusted to weave intricate figures on the library floor; although as in *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington* they may sometime stumble, as if by accident, into the middle of a pattern from which they find it difficult to extricate themselves. But

there has entered into all his work a hint of fable; and now the fables become apparent.

There are plots and plots, preconceived patternings which range from exhibitions of mechanical skill to purposeful moral exhortations; from Stendhalian equations to folk-stories springing spontaneously in the minds of peoples; from the latticed entanglements of Henry James, and the tea-pots and thunderstorms of the Brontes, to the far-off legends of Arthur, half-remembered. Characters may be unsleepingly watched and herded; or, on the other hand, if the reader is to be trusted, they may be given into the care of moral forces so inherent in the reader's mind that there appears at first to be no compulsion. The King Corphetua legend and the Cinderella legend, which were unblushingly resuscitated in the early days of Queen Victoria, may still be found lurking behind most of our bright new inventions, even those which boast of deriving from Vienna.

The imaginative Englishman is an ethic-making animal. As he improves in technical devices, and advances in self-possession, so it will be found increasingly difficult to keep any English artist from expounding some moral purpose or other. The ethical point is as intimately concerned in English art as is the razor in the older English pastime of horse-racing. It is not always apparent; indeed, it is not always there; but one has a mournful sense of recognition, of familiarity and almost of inevitability, as it is trotted out.

Physicists remark a phenomenon which they call free vibration and explain for us, in their popular descents, by the case of the tuning-fork which, whatever disturbances it goes through, will always fall into its appointed regular note after a brief interval of con-

fusion. So our English novelists may be compared if one may say it without offence, with tuning-forks made to vibrate at last in accordance with the national concern for morals, however celestial the entertainment with which, in their excited periods, they regale us.

And so when a novelist has been moved to work to a plot, there would seem to be some inner personal compulsion which finally directs his choice among imbroglíos. These are Freudian arcana, to be approached with diffidence; but in some writers the plot appears to arise from a deep emotional necessity—as, to take the roughest examples, the Bluebeard or Cinderella stories of the more motherly lady novelists; or one may observe the large-limbed ruffian of the temper of Balzac taking his, when they are not implicit in his characters, of set malice from his gentler enemies, particularly if they might be his critics, and very particularly if they were Saint Beuve or members of his set.

In the same way I think it might almost have been predicted by an all-wise reader that Mr. Brett Young, given the circumstances, would eventually select, for a framework, the two-brothers or three-sisters kind of fairy-tale. There are traces of this sort of grouping increasingly evident in the novels after this. And, anyhow with whatever regret, we must prepare to take leave of our musical parallels—although not to resign them to the ethnologist!

♦

XXII

‘MY BROTHER JONATHAN’

MR. BRETT YOUNG’S early and perhaps adolescent uneasiness over the use of the tidier (almost one might say the soberer) varieties of sentimentality we have already insisted upon, and even made some attempt to indicate as occasion served how he has become more and more tempted to portray the larger and less orderly uses of nobility in preference to such *menus plaisirs*, particularly when the large-scale performance involves the use of self-sacrifice. It is true that these moral pre-occupations, couched in luminous prose and manipulated with exquisite tact, have so far lain in most instances as lightly on the style as a blanket of rose-leaves; but they have been resolutely introduced. Moreover it seems to be a use which grows by what it feeds on.

I am reminded, so strongly as to be unable to withhold the analogy, of the case of Brahms (this is not going to be a parallel but a mere instance!) whose engaging and prevailing sentimentality was so thoroughly well rubbed into his huge themes, which then came in for such rigorous and unsentimental handling, that he contrived to pass among the uninitiated for fifty years as a pedantic dry-as-dust. And in *My Brother Jonathan* the infatuated Brahmsian may still seem to hear snatches from the last movement of the first symphony, in which the most faultily noble trumpet tune in the world gambols insistently above the reasonable fiddles.

Mr. Brett Young has always betrayed something of an inclination to make his more reputable characters take the centre of the stage like old-time actors and strike hushed and somewhat bronchial attitudes when they are about to behave in any way not markedly timid or conventional. Now for once he indulges himself to the full. For it is all set out fair now, in the form of a series of equation of sorts—that is to say, in the shape of the age-old story of the two brothers, Big Claus and Little Claus, good and ill—the good, of course, ministering without rest to the bad brother, who laps it all up, flattery, self-immolation and all, and fires out or supplants his modest relative whenever it falls in with his convenience—for nemesis to fall at last.

But that may be an exaggeration, although it is hard to tell, since Harold, the bad—or perhaps one should say the non-good—brother is so much an epitome of negative viciousness that it is hard to see him as a human being, and probably he is not really bad, ethically or sportingly speaking, at all. Things go so smoothly for him, he is so good at games, he is so unpestered with intelligence, and he is so inevitably accompanied by the serviceable and adoring Jonathan, that had he been born with the potentialities of Confucius he could hardly help becoming what he would himself call a bit of a bounder. Indeed, it is invariably with the suavest address and most elegant courtesy that he surveys the clumsy efforts which are made for his advancement; and they are always the kindest imaginable words, the most appropriate thanks blended with the most delicate congratulatory touches, which he lets fall as he prepares to withdraw to his inviolable social retreats. And perhaps, equally, no living being could help behaving with bounding com-

placency in the unfailing presence of the lugubriously helpful brother Jonathan. But, indeed, with a father so amorphous they are little to be blamed for some departure from the strict path of normal behaviour.

Apart from the singularly unpleasing Captain Antrim of *Woodsmoke* and the Nordic demigods, Godovius and Zahn and Furnival, Mr. Dakers, Senior, has characteristics as unpleasant as anyone in the whole range of the novels. Mr. Brett Young looks almost invariably on the bright side of mankind, and I think we may scent in this obliviousness to the black patches, the level instincts of the good physician. For in all the gamut of emotion which is played upon for the purposes of all these twenty novels, not one mean male rogue or parasitical female is seriously invoked. No clinging women have little lucrative love-affairs at the expense of his most idiotic quietist—indeed Alaric Grosmont gets off rather more lightly than most people. Even the lawyers are hardly the lawyers we know. With all the stretch of his powers the portrayal of meanness, the arrant despicabilities of the sponger, the clinger and the sneak are pretty clearly quite beyond him. But Mr. Dakers, Senior, almost is mean, though in the nicest of ways.

Mr. Dakers, Senior, is a poet and a gentleman and an agent for a firm of corset manufacturers. He encourages as fierce a light as he can of publicity to beat upon his first two occupations which, incompatible as they might seem to be, he runs very well in double harness; and he succeeds in keeping his third dark, even to his family, until he is knocked over by a motor-car and killed in the street and all his little secrets lie abruptly bare. His poetry strongly, or one might say weakly, resembles that of Stephen Phillips,

only it is not so good; his gentility consists in living above his means, in encouraging the more showy son at the expense of the more sound, in playing cricket rather well, in presenting a pavilion, for which he is unable to pay, to the local club—and in keeping his third and only remunerative occupation secret for twenty years.

The experienced reader may have the temerity to deduce, by the way, that the Dakers' creator is no impassioned cricketer.* Thus:

Jonathan had little of Harold's aptitude for games. It wasn't for want of trying. Indeed he made himself moderately good at all of them, but invariably in the less spectacular departments of each—the scrum at football (Harold was a wing three-quarter) the field at cricket, long distances at running.

There is nothing wrong with these phrases, nothing at least to lay the hand on; neither is there about the idiomatic English of Joseph Conrad, and yet it is somehow a little unfamiliar in use. But indeed Mr. Brett Young takes a tonic sub-acid tone about most games and pastimes,† whilst preserving a powerful liking for hunting and shooting and fishing. It is his slightly disagreeable characters who tend to be good at physical contents. Dr. Craig, later on in this book, is a scratch golfer.

However that may be, the gentility of Mr. Dakers is not a very intrusive gentility, and will stand well in comparison with most of the atavistic, pre-War, pro-

* He has, however, watched Worcestershire perform against the South Africans, in the company of one of the greatest batsmen of all time.

† But he has been known to visit London for the Cup Final, when a Black Country team was playing.

vincial variety. As to his competence as agent for corsets, really (as one might say) there is little evidence for or against it, except that he is not very well remunerated—which after all proves nothing although it is unusual nowadays, I am given to understand, amongst salesmen of anything. Corsets, given all the circumstances, would I suppose be about the worst things to pick. Perhaps the most interesting part of the outfit of Mr. Dakers, Senior, is the fact that one is left entirely in the air over the question of whether one is supposed to like him or not. This is highly uncommon among novelists, and takes us at once to the heart of another of Mr. Brett Young's distinctive virtues. He does not, cannot one would say, take sides for and against his characters, any more than the bacteriologist does among his infections.

This godlike, yet impassioned, detachment is possessed by very few novelists indeed, except perhaps the strayed mathematicians, those who, like Stendhal, read the Civil Code every morning before breakfast for style and examine the heart of man in the afternoon for exercise. It may be seen in its unmixed strangeness when we consider that the novelist, writing over the spread of time, composes his characters very much as the oyster composes its pearls, and rids himself of the unpleasantnesses of his outward life by grotesque projections and delayed but fatal revenges. Detachment to this degree deprives him of all that fun but is, perhaps, in itself a sufficient armour against the insensitive world.

We have noticed this aloofness already in our author, and shall again. But in the meantime it may be well to remark that if one is at all inclined to give way to social dubiety one will feel over Mr. Dakers, Senior, that

irritated, shame-faced, lonely feeling which invades those who care about such things and do not know what to decide on a point of decorum on the spur of the moment—as when one's interlocutor in a railway-train appears (if one's eye happens to have been trained in the school of an elder or a youngest Dakers), just sufficiently loosely dressed and rustic in speech to be either a duke or a dairyman. For my part I should be inclined to side against him even if his pretensions were firmer, since he writes bad verses and does not in the least suspect that they are bad; but it may be that on those grounds public opinion will be against this view. If one must write poetry in England it is probably less reprehensible to write it badly, and least reprehensible to face the matter out boldly. The taint of possible effeminacy is only to be washed out in an ocean of slush or else in torrents of bravado.

As for our feelings about Jonathan Dakers, we are fully instructed there what to feel, and kept well posted; and indeed it is impossible not to like the lumbering strabismic young ass, with one subservient eye on his fortunate brother and the other kept sedulously averted from his own interests; whose conscience goes to such lengths that it will not even let him tell a lie to ease the mind of a dying man. To such an *impasse* will a too-attentive nobility lead us! But perhaps a doctor should be trusted to know best about death-beds. They are ticklish affairs; and it may be that nobody behaves other than artificially and, as it were, in a converse of character, when faced with that insolent abyss.

Jonathan's general ineffectuality, needless to say, is drawn minutely and with an inevitable gradualness. When the dazzling brother is not in the offing, merely

the mere force of circumstances, even of propitious circumstances alone, will suffice to draw out the applausive humility. Thus, having learned up his medicine with invincible thoroughness at North Bromwich, Jonathan takes a partnership at Wednesford:

His life was fuller and increasingly strenuous as the grip of winter tightened on that iron land, squeezing still more light out of its smoke-throttled sky, chastening the desert with a glittering film of hoar-frost or coverlet of snow that veiled its degradations, save where the ever-burning pit-mounds penetrated their whiteness like black volcanic cones. So crowded were these days that Jonathan had little time to think of anything else but his work, and even if life had been more leisurely the interest of that work would still have held him, so satisfying in spite of its frustrations, so engrossing for all its monotony, was the new discipline of practice.

He began to realize that the studious years in North Bromwich and even those inspiring months of hospital work with Lloyd Moore were no more than a period of probation. He was amazed at his own ignorance, abashed by the assurance which he brought with him to Wednesford. At first he had been inclined to imagine himself astonishing the darkness of Wednesford with the light of complete medical modernity; the timely cleansing and ordering of Hammond's consulting-room symbolized his reforming vigour. Yet, as time went on, he found himself relying more and more humbly on the old man's experience and advice. For Hammond, knowing little of modern methods, had acquired, in forty years of practice, a clinical wisdom that left Jonathan's far behind.

It is the picture of no more than natural modesty, one would feel, if that were all. Yet, after the delicate impact of twenty incidents of the sort, one falls into the desired mood of affectionate contempt for Jonathan—in time to marvel at the miracle of tracheotomy which he improvises by candle-light.

Old Hammond is one of Mr. Brett Young's best doctor studies:

He wore a pepper and salt coat, full-skirted, of the kind that prosperous farmers use for riding, a folded Ascot cravat secured by a horse-shoe tiepin, and a tall square-topped felt hat which he neglected to remove. His clothes, indeed, seemed more suited to the practice of agriculture than that of midwifery; the black bag which he carried should have contained samples of oats rather than forceps. He stood there, a gaunt and grizzled figure, blinking at the light; the grey stubble on his lean jaw gave him a hungry wolfish look; but his features, though shrunken and discoloured by the changes of age, showed traces of the nobility which Jonathan had noticed in his daughter's. He had the same straight overheavy eyebrows, the same firm, yet potentially passionate mouth, though the lips were thinned by age and of a bluish pallor. His face was that of a man mortally tired, not only by conscious exertion but by the unconscious struggle of a strong spirit battling with age.

Jonathan's supreme test comes in the matter of this Miss Hammond, the doctor's daughter, as might have been anticipated; but it does not take the course that might have been anticipated, or not until the end of the book. The world of femininity supplies the solvent in which the love of Jonathan for Harold is tested.

Harold is analysed by the solvent War, and, rather surprisingly, comes out of it none the worse spiritually. If anything he emerges a shade more human, although badly knocked about on the physical plane.

There are, I should guess (not entirely without calculation), more portraits of women in *My Brother Jonathan* than in any other of the novels. Certainly there are more memorable ones. Even the incidental temptresses are carefully differentiated, from the three Martyn girls down to the three Gaige girls. One notices, by the way, that it is one of Mr. Brett Young's unostentatious strokes of cunning, if it is not a trick of the crafty unconscious, which confirms by such off-hand turns as the grouping here and there of three sisters, even when not required by the imbroglio, and by odd parallelisms of such elements as the flooding in of light, and the general atmosphere of myth.

But the finest picture of all is that of Mrs. Dakers, the mother of Harold and Jonathan. It is as profound a study as was ever made of the double-souled middle-class housewife of the last Victorian generation:

On every possible occasion Mrs. Dakers would recite. It was, in fact, the only way in which she could get level with her versatile husband; and Mr. Dakers, who was, at least in theory, a feminist, encouraged her to do so. As a tribute to his wife's talent he would sit with bowed head, two brown hands clasped over his eyes, listening intently as if he were in church. For Mrs. Dakers, in the days before Mr. Dakers induced her to submerge her talent in his, had been an actress—no common mummer, be it understood, but a great exponent of Shakespeare. And though, in private, Mr. Dakers

frequently forgot this and was very rude to her, in public he never allowed anybody else to forget it. But for the passion that had forced her to forsake her art and attain immortality, of another kind, his own poetry, the name of Lavinia Lord, he suggested, would have been remembered beside that of Mary Anderson. A wonderful actress, he said: and he had said it so many times that all of us, who had never heard of Lavinia Lord before, believed implicitly in Mrs. Dakers' genius—all of us, that is, except Lady Hingston, who had an acid word for everybody and said that she was prepared to believe that Mrs. Dakers was capable of acting any part but that of a lady. But then, the Hingstons made a business of everything, even of gentility; while the essence of the Dakers' code, in sport, in literature, in everything, was amateurism.

There, in Mr. Brett Young's inexhaustible way, we are given incidental flashes of portraiture of not only three individuals, but of a race, a class, a profession, a trade, an art and an attitude to life. And, still, that is only one facet out of the hundred with which Mrs. Dakers manages to scintillate:

As a matter of fact, there is no doubt that she must have been in youth a pretty woman; a graceful though rather big-boned blonde, with eyes a little too prominently blue and hair a little too golden to be genuine. At the time when she first—and almost literally—swam into our ken, the star had lost a little of its brilliance; the voluminous, flowing robes gave an uncomfortable air of diffuseness to a form that was undeniably skinny; the fixed and languid smile had a bony, a skeletal quality; and the goitre, made more apparent by the desiccation of the sur-

rounding tissues, was habitually veiled by wisps of tulle or chiffon, the effect of which was untidy rather than ethereal.

Was ever the biology of the late Edwardian era more prettily put in evidence in the interests of psychology?

It is difficult to say if Mr. Dakers was aware of this decadence. Certainly in public, he gave no sign of being so. In the presence of visitors he always treated her with the 'distant reverence' of his favourite song, with veiled allusions to her dramatic triumphs, with the solicitude of an impresario arranging shaded lights and the right setting for an interview with the Press, or of an amateur displaying the best picture (a typical Rossetti) in his collection. And Mrs. Dakers out of sheer habit, or because whatever she may have been originally, he had made an actress of her, played up to him, posing with her still, rapt smile and drooping finger-tips, or moving, with little stately hesitations, like a tragedy queen, until you realized that she *was* no common clay. Her voice, again . . . Mr. Dakers had seen to that as well. Small-talk on those smiling lips, would have sounded sacrilegious; and so, for the most part, in public, she was silent. Whenever she did speak—to ask you if you wished for cream or sugar or both—she always gave the impression of talking in blank verse; and when Mr. Dakers heard her, he would drop his own voice, as if he were anxious that you should not miss hearing a gem of eloquence to which faint echoes of a cockney accent added, in the Midland ears, a trace of the exotic. From first to last he used her, in public, with what he himself would have described as an old-world courtesy; as a work of art—which she was, increasingly; as

something ethereal and fairylike—which she certainly was not; as a creature isolated and removed from all vulgar knowledge and experience; a poetical abstraction absolved from the needs and emotions of dusty humanity. In private, however, Mrs. Dakers must have been permitted to relax; for the household was pressed for money, and generally in debt; and off-stage, so to speak, their ethereal union had been blessed by the birth of two children, both of them boys.

Notice how firmly the physical framework is set up, and then how thoroughly the flesh and all its trappings are stretched on it. And so, in shabby scraps, growing scantier and shabbier, Mrs. Dakers fades out in the War-period:

Nothing but the prospect of meeting Harold could have uprooted Mrs. Dakers from Wednesford. The rôle of a railway traveller was one which she had forgotten, and it took her five or six hours to dress for it. When finally, in her flowing black velvet, Jonathan drove her to the station and deposited her in the train, she looked like a medieval martyr, a mature Joan of Arc, on her way to the stake. Apparently, however, she enjoyed the visit more than she had expected. She returned in triumph scornful of the curious looks that her costume excited, and though the details of her experience were too sacred for Jonathan's ears, he gathered that Harold was now looking quite himself again, that his row of medal-ribbons had excited a lot of notice, and that the Shakespearean tradition in acting had departed for ever.

'I am almost thankful,' she said, with a novel variation of the ancient theme, 'that your dear

father was spared the shock of listening to such a Juliet.'

Mr. Brett Young seems positively unable to confine himself to the drawing of only one portrait at a time. He sees, as well as hears and thinks, harmonically. Thus here we have, besides the whole of an old woman, profiles of two men and a full-face of another, long-dead. With so smooth a *diminuendo* is this fading done that it is quite a shock to find that Mrs. Dakers does not die in the compass of the book, but that another person is caught up in the clanking machinery at the end.

The mechanics throughout until then, are worked with the greatest smoothness. There is some harmonious patterning done with the occasional appearances of the hostile doctor, Craig. Much of the story has to do with the growth of opinion by dint of scandal-mongering in a small industrial town; and Jonathan's great dash to the metropolis for serum, followed by his celebrated tracheotomy and his Napoleonic capture of a bed in the hostile hospital, is used with admirable economy to give the tone of it all, as appears, for example, in the description of the two schools of thought obtaining over the escapade:

Jonathan was not only the Hospital's evil angel; he was a public danger. Through sheer incompetence, if not out of criminal carelessness, he had failed to diagnose a straightforward case of diphtheria which Mrs. Perry was certain she could have recognized at sight. By neglecting to notify it, he had laid the whole town open to infection. Having failed in his diagnosis he had proceeded, with unexampled frivolity, to leave his patient and go

dashing off to North Bromwich in his motor-car on some errand of pleasure at whose nature it would be indecent even to hint. Returning late from his debauches he had found his unhappy victim *in extremis* and undertaken an unnecessary operation which he was entirely unqualified to perform. At this point, frightened by what he had done, he had conceived the diabolical plan of throwing the burden of his failure on poor Miss Jessell's nursing, hoping that the child, by dying inside it . . . would throw discredit on the Hospital. The child was already moribund and could not possibly live till morning. All Dr. Craig's patients in the Hospital were certain to be infected with the disease, and two of the nurses were already sickening for it.

That is the official view; the voice is the voice of the great manufacturers, speaking through the wife of the high-church vicar. And this is the view of the mythopœic underlings, the voice of the spirit of the English folk :

There was not, there never had been, any diphtheria in Wednesford. The disease, like appendicitis, was an invention of Craig's, who, as Medical Officer of Health, was paid half a guinea for every case notified, out of the money which the working-classes were forced to pay in the form of rates. The oldest woman in Higgin's Buildings naturally knew all about diphtheria; and Ada's baby was suffering from the croup. The operation had become necessary not because of the disease, but because of the stuff which Jonathan had been compelled to inject into her by Craig's orders. As for the operation itself; Jonathan had performed it simply and dexterously with Joe's pocket-knife. He had removed

the child's windpipe, sucked the poison out of it, and put it back again, as was always done (the old woman affirmed) in bad cases of the croup. After that, quite rightly he had taken her to the Hospital. Not that Higgin's Buildings approved of hospitals. On the contrary. He had simply taken her there to show the nobs in the Wolverbury Road that Joe Hingston, who in spite of his other shortcomings, paid high wages, had intended the Hospital to be used by working-class people. This was the moment in short, for all the down-trodden to rally round Jonathan and show the Rector, the Tories and the Wolverbury Road generally that Craig couldn't fatten on their miseries for ever.

Two voices are there; and it is a tremendous advantage in a novelist of manners to be able to set them both down so succinctly, in so smooth a counterpoint.

In *My Brother Jonathan* we visit the country west of Uffdown less even than in *Portrait of Clare*. Except for one Welsh walk which occupies half a page we are never out of sight of the black fringe.

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XXIII

A CLOUD OF VACANCIES

UNLESS I have failed to follow the philosophical drift of modern physics (which may be, perhaps, not an altogether inconceivable contingency), I take it we are required to understand that space exists only in the neighbourhood of matter, and that matter, when you get close to it, is no more than a scurry of probabilities. That, in fact (to put it not very poetically, and not at all scientifically) the universe consists of dubious solids separated by terrific relays of non-existence. It is a difficult picture, and sets the heart sighing, almost, for its lost musical analogies. Yet it seems as good a parallel as any available in the more abstract compartments of the mind where these general metaphors await selection, for that curious book *Jim Redlake*, with its unremitting work for unity resulting in discreet chaos; with its apparently concrete, ever-present principal character; with its unusually variegated troop of apparently sharply defined attendant figures, who abruptly cease to exist whenever his attention is withdrawn from them; and with its bright spacious landscapes, of Leicestershire, of Radnorshire, of South Africa, which all flicker, too, as the gaze decides to settle on them, like dissolving views. ('German East,' however, and the lands of Kilimanjaro stand firm.) Never before, surely, did a decent novel of sedate bearing so baffle the earnest seeker. There is no fable in the strict sense; but the whole

tendency of the book is to bestow an air of fabulousness upon ordinary affairs and appearances.

Jim Redlake was not intended to be in any way an unusual book, of that I am quite convinced. Had this been so we should have had a different brand of heterodoxy. Mr. Brett Young has never been at a loss for atmospheric effect. He has always excelled in learned and curious devices, particularly in black and white trickeries of light and shade; but the transcendental effect in this book, a book which surely was intended to be as matter of fact as it could be made, seems clearly not deliberate. I should say that for once in his career Mr. Brett Young has fallen a victim to what is the chronic ailment of most other novelists, and of the rest of the world in general—himself, a monstrous growth, has for once enveloped himself, and he has failed to get a character ‘across.’ Or otherwise it would be necessary to assume that he has not laboured long enough, that he has taken too much for granted; which is, I should say, absurd. But however that may be, there is no denying that he has omitted to leave a sufficient number of clues for the reader to realize *Jim Redlake*, whilst himself realizing the shadowy youth intensely. And so there crops up in every vacant patch this unusual effect of ghostly remoteness, or rather of ghostly removes. Ordinarily when a novelist fails to realize his characters, his novel flops and fails and there an end. But Mr. Brett Young is far from an ordinary novelist, and *Jim Redlake* is far from a failure.

What has happened seems simply to be not so much that *Jim* is not properly externalized, as that he is not properly done up into parcels of words. He is there right enough, but we cannot lay hands on him when

we want him. He has been too familiar to his author to be energetically conveyed. We see his general idea far too well. He is a kind of molecular cloud. It seems to me, in fact, that in this book autobiography was, all unconsciously, the driving force—that and the wish to improve, by taking a short cut, on the scheme of *My Brother Jonathan*. I do not suggest that the autobiographical element has been other than an impulsion which provides motive power; and perhaps much of the atmosphere of the book is entirely irrelevant, as certainly are most of the facts. Form goes by the board, thrown over with the facts, although here and there what look like last-minute attempts at caulking and patching have been made. Every now and then Jim is descended upon and fussed over by a kind of creative helplessness. But it is no use. He always settles ponderously down again to the closest possible grips with the earth. Whole incidents, promising anecdotes and likely personalities, straggle aimlessly away into palpable afterthoughts; and the book, however one takes hold of it, falls with an air of expectant resignation into five pieces.

XXIV

'JIM REDLAKE'

JIM REDLAKE falls into five distinct pieces, delightful pieces it is true but pieces none the less, however one takes hold of it. This may largely be the effect of the weight of documentary matter in it; but perhaps a partial reason even more delicate may be recognized. There is this noticeable tide in the affairs of most artists.

It is the unthankfulest part of criticism, if it aspires to be at all complete, that it cannot possibly overlook (however far it may be able to contrive a neglect to mention) the relationship between Art and Applause, or, to put it bluntly, between a commercial success and its successors. Mr. Brett Young is the last man likely to be changed by popularity, as by prosperity, but so was Shakespeare (though not ungrateful for either) who hastily finished, or improvised, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 'with Sir John in it' at the popular behest.

Portrait of Clare and *My Brother Jonathan* had been commercial successes and they had been almost entirely Black Country books. In *Jim Redlake* there is just the suggestion that we are to have a *My Brother Jonathan* 'with Wales and "German East" in it.' Jim might well have walked into Radnorshire, and gone to Africa, in any event, but perhaps he would not have done either so deliberately, or distinctly. And why are we presented with a most unusual, a somewhat undocumented, and a rather unnecessary, London period?

These five pieces, and they are well enough differentiated for the purpose, Heaven knows, may be treated for convenience, geographically. The first, after a brief tuning-up in North Bromwich, covers Jim's childhood, spent in Leicestershire. This phase is vividly described, and has all the aspect of being remembered from pictures burnt on the clear retina of a child.

The second phase, after a very slight prelude of school at Winchester, of which the reader is given very little notion, covers a period of medical study in London, and has comparatively no sharp drawing even in the background, except for a few casual caricatures. But indeed we might have inferred from other evidence that Mr. Brett Young is no connoisseur of London and has spent little time in the Wen. The inscrutable creative wisdom, directing inconclusively, seems to have decided merely that it was advisable so to plant Jim at this stage that he could conveniently have his heart broken while seeing a little of the inside of Mayfair and at the same time meeting a fresh and motley selection of human comedians in a Bloomsbury lodging-house—old broken-down actresses, bitter young poets coming on, ex-sergeant-majors with foibles, and the other not unfamiliar metropolitan features in fiction. There is the suggestion at times that a notebook has been emptied into the middle of *Jim Redlake*. But, if it has been, it is the notebook of an exhaustive observer.

The third phase is briefly passed in the heart of the true Brett Young country. The effect is one of vividness, but the vividness is concentrated in Jim, and the sceneries, when one looks twice at them, are seen to be subjective and generalized versions of the familiar

landscape. Reacting to his broken heart, Jim recapitulates roughly, but in very different fettle, the epic walk of Abner Fellows in *The Black Diamond*. This is the home-coming motif of which Mr. Brett Young is fond; and it ends here, as in *Mr. Walcot Goes Home*, in a swoon. We may trace, I think, a symbolic touch in these accidents and illnesses and fainting-fits; a mass of the fabric of memory short-circuiting, a calling into consciousness of the most rare and grateful feeling known to the heart of man—the waking in a strange bed and seeing the light again after an escape from what seemed certain death.

The fourth phase is passed in South Africa and 'German East.' This phase is at times objectively and even vividly seen; and it ends with a crystalline vision of the Tanga campaign. War releases, with the energy of childhood, all the powers of sophistication; that is one reason why it not only makes poets of men but why it sometimes turns out, almost unaided, very good poets. In this fragment, which is the largest into which the book falls, we may discern if we will take the trouble to trace them in detail (and it is very well worth it), the more intimate changes in the author's prose since the days of *Marching on Tanga*.

And, needless to say, we may trace in little the changes in himself. Curious in particular is it to observe, on casting back, how practical the prose has become, while losing little of its former power of attaining the sudden, thrilling overtones. It can rise to the height of poetry as ever, but now it must rise steeply and less frequently. There is enough of the heights in it, however, for its purpose here, and it is now very much more efficient than in the contemporary book in the more informative parts of description. It would be

more useful on Kilimanjaro than *Marching on Tanga*, provided always that one proposed to descend. War, too, is seen, not unnaturally, more from the outside; and there are some supremely good battle-pieces in this part of *Jim Redlake*, detailed rather more from the historian's than the participant's point of view. But for an example of the way in which practicability and poetry and geography alternate in this phase of the book, lightly and easily with the rapidity and efficiency of an electric current, a less ambitious passage may be selected. Martock is a novelist of the Welsh border, and in part one of the very infrequent self-projections of the author:

'Clun Forest? Don't speak of it for God's sake, Redlake!' said Martock. And yet they did speak of it, establishing as they spoke, the spiritual bond, far closer and subtler than that of common human acquaintance, which unites men who talk, in a distant land, of landscapes which each knows and loves.

If they had scoured the world in search of it, they could not have found a greater contrast to those scenes than their present setting. Even as they sat there talking, its face changed. An aura of momentous approaching events was in the air. Creeping along the red earth road which the Indian pioneers had made, dragged by straining mule-teams, through chasms that the recent rains had torn in its surface, the great grey M.T. lorries and the Divisional Train poured steadily into Taveta through clouds of churned dust that drifted like firelit smoke above the encampment. Below the road some thousands of horses and mules were being watered—poor beasts that in a few weeks' time must perish inevitably amid the belts of tsetse fly through which

they would pass. And, behind the doomed animals, marched company after company of doomed men, the units of the South African Brigade which had sweltered aboard the *Armada*, tramping in through the dust from railhead, with little enough of their old boyish jauntiness. The sun sank precipitately behind the Latema coast, drenching the forest in a redness that seemed to symbolize the blood of the Kaleharies by which it had been won. And above all this dusty turmoil, remote, magnificently bathed in the last sunlight, swam the glaciers of Kilimanjaro, whose stainless majesty reduced all the stir at its feet—tents scattered like the trail of a paper-chase, brown horse-lines, parked transport, slow columns of men crawling onward like centipedes—to a level peculiarly humble and insignificant.

The fifth phase is spent in England and is devoted rather to the author's desperate attempts to pull his novel together than to any further elucidation of Jim. There is the faint air of hurried panic about all this section, a panic not unreminiscent of the last volume of Proust's long valedictory, *Le Temps Retrouvé*. But Proust was a dying man in a legitimate hurry, and Mr. Brett Young is a world removed from that excuse and condition. Truly *Jim Redlake* is a curious book. I hazard the opinion that it goes deeper than either critic or reader ought to pry.

Nevertheless we must not carry deference to the length of overlooking the evident truth that a novelist is a public institution! It is noteworthy that Mr. Brett Young is inclined to like *Jim Redlake* best of his books. He says that his mind returns to it with a 'nostalgic wistfulness, like a lemming in search of Atlantis.'

The love entanglement in *Jim Redlake* is the old

triangular proposition, already enunciated but not solved in *My Brother Jonathan*. It is exquisitely set forth and demonstrated and clewed up, and fitted out with a presumably inevitable solution to everybody's satisfaction. The women involved, both the principals, and their chiefs of staff, begetters, counselling elders, confidantes, emissaries and female batmen, are all as bright, as airy, and as unbelievable as humming-birds. Cynthia, in particular, is beyond question the best version of Mr. Brett Young's hard, lovely, flighty young female aristocrat; as Julian, a more detached Harold, is of his hard, fortunate, aristocratical young male—although certainly Julian's people are but simple stock-brokers.

And yet, there is a singular intermittence in the presentation of all of them. They bubble over with life in the presence of Jim, their lineaments fill with being; and then suddenly they slip and fall back into automata, or dust or shadows, the moment they have ceased to minister to him. This is true, I think it is safe to say, of all the characters in the book, even of the three men of letters, masterly though these are.

There seems to be no doubt, alas, as we have already seen more than once, that Mr. Brett Young's only really unsympathetic people are to be found among his men of letters; and in this particularity, if further proof were needed that his outlook is essentially poetical, that he is as far removed as possible from the traditional novelist, we should, I think, find it. A novelist, at least a novelist of this size and intensity, is first and foremost an abnormally sensitive absorber of life. Nothing can happen in his vicinity which does not either become immediately incorporated in his

mental diet, or else remain, an irritant residuum in the mind, to grow by minute unconscious accretions into something characteristic, for good or ill. It is difficult to see upon what other terms a novelist would be prepared to forego bulls and bears and dictaphones, or lancet and phial, to undertake the bone-shaking labour. And yet it is surely impossible to believe that, apart from the dreadful Captain Antrim and the flabby demigods, Zahn, Godovius and Furnival, Mr. Brett Young has met in life, and lingered over, no unsympathetic people at all, except among the brightest and best—those dedicated and decent men and women, the scribbling fraternity; to credit that, during his extensive acquaintance with professional soldiers, every one that has crossed his path has been a courteous gentleman, or that even in the most mercifully slight hobnobbing with lawyers he has never encountered a predatory milksop or a fiery money-grub. In fact, although Mr. Brett Young's world parallels our own so closely, and joins it so intimately in non-human regions, still it is a shut world with its own odd laws and a history curiously askew. Except in *Woodsmoke* and *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington*, naturalistic ventures both, it is the autonomous, self-sufficient world of the poet and not the railed-off corner in the universe, superintended by a pulpit or a crow's-nest, of the ordinary novelist.

Yet, strangest of all, in Redlake Senior, this unpleasant novelist, there runs a strong autobiographical channel, like an umbilical cord, which keeps him more alive, for what that is worth, than any of the other auxiliaries. This must be taken on trust and verified from the book. Redlake Senior is not divisible for quotation. Neither, for the matter of that, is Starling,

the wild-eyed genius (with some personal touches of D. H. Lawrence), nor Martock, the solemn and comparatively impeccable novelist with the portable typewriter who figures in the East African campaign.

In fact, in this oddest of normal-seeming novels, when one comes to look really closely, no single character is separable from the context—although sometimes a group of clucking by-characters, a cabbala in cantrip, as in the continual contrasting of the three clergymen, takes on a symbolic authenticity which advances memorably near to the real.

The three clergymen, who sat back to back defensively, like bullocks in a field that hounds have invaded, Mr. Jewell of Thorpe, Mr. Holly of Rossington and Mr. Malthus, the inappropriately labelled Vicar of Cold Orton, were among the most faithful of Mrs. Weston's spiritual supporters. Mr. Jewell, a tall slovenly man, with a big beard, smelling of tobacco, who snorted as he breathed through a moustache that appeared to grow up into his nostrils, supplied, with his wife, the main social link between the Grange and the Castle. Mr. Holly of Rossington, a plump, white-handed bachelor with a moderate income of his own, was the principal apostle of culture in the neighbourhood, a 'great reader' as the saying went, whose intimate feminine humour flattered the ladies to whom he talked gardening and presented the chosen blooms which his soft fingers arranged so deftly in cut-glass specimen vases. Mr. Malthus, the incumbent of Cold Orton, a bleak hill-parish, was a frozen, tight-lipped man, whose small eyes, magnified by concave spectacles, seemed to bulge in perpetual surprise at the length of the family beneath whose coils he struggled like a desiccated Laocoön.

Dr. Weston, Jim's grandfather, whose far-flung influence pervades the book, is nowhere at all sharply seen; and that strikes one oddly again, since one would think with the book shut and put away, that one could swear to him anywhere. His moods are indelible. So many little hints of character have been put before us that we are astonished to discover no hard reality behind on close inspection, no background in the book to pin them to. Dr. Weston, is in sober fact, superficially the most real of all Mr. Brett Young's many doctors, being a conscious impressionistic portrait of his maternal grandfather. Thorpe Folville is Somerby. And the young Francis has opened fifty gates in a day for the old horseman.

There is undoubtedly some sort of inverse ratio to be recorded in the fictional vividness of 'real' characters and places. The doctor's wife, wholly an imaginary virago, is quite distinct in patches. So too is Mrs. Jewell, the clergyman's wife and a V.A.D. of very superior standing, a psychologist's lecture-room monstrosity, a type that never was on land or sea, although personages available to be mistaken for frail sisters of this sort of creature do exist on the outskirts of 'counties':

Though she was nominally the quartermaster of Lady Essendine's hospital at Thorpe Castle, the proper functions of this office were the least part of Mrs. Jewell's activities, which embraced the supervision not only of the War Office and Admiralty but of the Cabinet, the Ministry of Food, the railways, the Army Chaplain's Department (by proxy, through Mr. Jewell) and General Headquarters in France—of everything, in fact, from the *morale* of the trenches to the morals of the scullery at Thorpe

Castle. By virtue of her family's distinguished military history this war was her war, and nobody could dispute or share rights of possession save authentic regular officers of high rank. In her eyes Jim Redlake had no standing whatever. As a temporary officer he was cowered with a crushing weight of original sin; as a colonial he laboured under suspicions even heavier, being prone, as such, to every kind of indiscipline from mutiny to rape. The fact that he was wounded made no claim on Mrs. Jewell's sympathy. It implied, at the best, an amateur's carelessness; at the worst, a deliberate attempt to escape from the front. From the first moment of their meeting she made it quite clear that Jim could not expect to presume on their former acquaintance. He was a patient—the very next thing to a criminal—and the last thing he was expected to do at Thorpe Castle was to feel at home.

To this petty Amazon, this elderly female Antrim, a charming foil runs through the book in a Miss Minnett: whose only office, apart from providing this contrast, is to try to lend Jim fifty pounds when he is in desperate need. Of course he will not accept it:

It would be like borrowing crumbs from a church mouse to take money from Miss Minnett.

It is a delightful image; but only Jim and his trainers and the Antrims' friends in their Africa, know exactly why he should not accept the muscardine kindness, if the mouse had a superfluity of crumbs and a pronounced wish for the transaction to take place—why exactly it was obligatory to deprive the little old lady of her long-meditated little piece of generosity. However, his wooden chivalry is rewarded; for Providence

or an agent enwraps him with blindness and he forthwith blunders into the company of a long-lost relative who approves of that kind of thing, and whose approval capitalizes for a great deal more than fifty pounds. A direct intervention of the god Mammon, a god much given, indeed, to these freakish manifestations!

XXV

YOUNG ENGLAND

IN *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington* we leave all fairylands and private universes very far behind us, and find ourselves, as in *Woodsmoke*, exploring in a monstrous country much less familiar and in the company of a severely practical and unprejudiced natural historian. One would have assumed that Mr. Brett Young is more familiar with African wilds than with the desolation of lower middle class provincial England, but there is a strongly persuasive flavour of observed veracity about this new expedition. Close familiarity, nevertheless, does not seem to be necessary to the true novelist, especially when he is a true poet. Some novelists appear to avoid it deliberately. There are many instances of most enlightening books being written about places and classes which the authors have never visited. One need not go so far as Mr. Well's convincing moon. *Martin Schuler*, that beautiful study of pre-war Germany at its best, by the late Miss Romer Wilson who had never been there, is a case in point. For my part I have not sufficient experience to tell whether *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington* is authoritative; but it is full of likely detail and it is certainly productive of thought.

This new country, then, is provincial suburbia, and the creatures we are to study in it are a sub-species of the genus lower middle class. Let me hasten to say, since merely to name the gradients of the social ladder is tacitly to claim a certain personal lordliness, that

no undue reflections will be made or intended here upon that mighty bulwark of the nation. It is the backbone if not of England, at least of the industrialists' paradise which we have been given instead. Those necessary men, the public speaker and the tax collector, would be helpless without it, and so would much else. Most of us, I suppose, who lack the quintessential Norman blood have somewhere strong affiliations to it. There are few indeed of perishable Englishmen, outside Debrett, but have one foot in Balham, not to speak of Kensal Rise.

Nobody quite knows where the middle classes end; but about the limits of these lower middle classes there is no difference of definition. It is that vast segment of society, subordinate clerks almost to a man and typists to a woman, almost invariably resident in a suburb, the class which is bounded at the bottom by the small shopkeeper, who struggles ingratiatingly half in and half out of it, and at the top by middling officers and officials, who despise it but accept its standards. It is honest, hard-working, dull and almost always harmless. The advertising profession, bad art and the cheap journals could not exist without it; and in times of international disturbance, neither could the nation.

The development of *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington* takes place entirely in this class, and the principal, or at least the foreground characters are members of a small but most interesting sub-species of it. I refer to the Lesser or Lower Middle Snob. This creature is equally honest and hardworking; but it is, also, poisonous.

The snob has been defined as that animal which meanly imitates mean things. This minor variety

meanly imitates the snob: and as its senses are so enfeebled that it is unfitted to make one single detached and accurate observation, it gets even its most desired copying subtly wrong. One saw and heard little of it before the War. Perhaps it did not exist then, or perhaps it had not separated itself from the protective shadow of its parent stock. I am inclined to think it had not, and that it was travellers' tales of officers' messes that first stirred it to individual life. Certainly it was not until the post-war hysteria set definitely in that an environment on the large scale was available for its culture; and very certain it is that it is now flourishing beyond all other sorts and conditions of men, and that its growth is connected directly with the popularization of the internal-combustion engine and of the game of lawn tennis.

Mr. Everyman, who simpers on almost every page of every newspaper, beneath his simpering examplars on every wall of every public conveyance, to advertisers who cordially simper back, is its accepted symbol, in which it glories. For him the suit of plus-fours was devised and the beret and the debased bowler hat of commerce (the foul corruption of a singularly unattractive object—the undress helmet of his masters). For him it is that all markets are flooded with exclusive designs. For him the nigger, or negroid aspirant, whimpers on the wireless, and the announcing uncles pitch up their fantastic but imitable accents, their peptonized Surbitonian. There is a strong probability that he is to inherit the earth.

But 'he' is perhaps a misnomer. The lower middle class, generally speaking, is a matriarchy, and this section of it is intensely matriarchal. Mr. Beerbohm seems to have discerned its advent, in a paradox, afar

off, towards the end of the 'nineties. 'Women,' he said, 'are becoming nearly as rare as ladies.' So they are, now, among these people; and men, in a courteous reversal are becoming quite as rare as gentlemen.

The four root pre-occupations of this section of society—the dance, the hike, lawn tennis and riding at great speeds for short distances on motor-bicycles—if not impracticable in the absence of the fair, have at least been found to gain enormously from her participation. And, as it happened, she was enfranchised just in time. She has advanced by way of directing these pastimes to excelling in them, and already the highest flights of the internal combustion engine are open to her as the paths of Heaven. Already she is more adventurous than her male—who has begun to put his hair in curling irons, to judge by the look of him. For my part I never think nowadays of the barrier mass of the Pyrenees or of the blue waters of the Grecian archipelagoes, but I seem to see the depilated and complaisant figure of the intrepid English typist.

It is worth noticing, although such an excursion has little to do with the sober piece of discovery which is at the bottom of *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington*, that this ascendancy of the female may be not without biological significance. One hopes not. It would be a great pity if Mr. Bernard Shaw were to be disappointed after all his work for the superman, and a pity greater still if learning and the arts were to vanish utterly from the earth, even though it might be to be replaced by government of the people, by the people and for the people. Nevertheless, there is this disturbing sign, and there are others, that Mankind may be trending

towards the condition of the 'English-speaking' lower middle-class snob. There is some slight Biblical authority for the prospect, and a striking precedent exists in the supercession of the dinosaurs by the small soft mammals.

XXVI

‘MR. AND MRS. PENNINGTON’

BUT the destiny of the race is here a digression, as in the film-producer's conception of a film of *The Outline of History*. I firmly believe that there is no book in which this mirror of humanity, this self-appointed elite of the lower middle classes, is at once so dispassionately and clearly set forth as in *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington*—save only in that most terrible of modern cathartics, *The Trial of Edith Thompson and Frederick Bywaters*. It is all here, from its cheerfully bright external accoutrements, as to be viewed on the hoardings, down to its more intimate atmosphere of continuous subdued sensuality broken by interludes of obstetric idleness; an atmosphere redolent of grubby shoulder-straps and cheap, stale eau-de-Cologne. Indeed, the rendering of this pervading air of soilure, so foreign to his outdoor airs, with its acid decay of pleasurable and useful instincts, reminiscent of early morning at a whelk-stall, is one of Mr. Brett Young's greatest triumphs of versatility.

The principal characters are necessarily very young, although necessarily they go through their antics before a background of vaguely unhappy antediluvians—typical members of the parent stock—the genuine lower middle class from which they stem, amazed at these pretty-spoken whipper-snappers, their nieces and nephews. One reverend senior steps down to closer quarters, but of him more anon. We are provided additionally, in the shape of a Captain Small, with

what may well count for a specimen of the 'missing link' in this brisk piece of evolution. Captain Small is almost sufficiently described when it has been explained that he is of the type of temporary officer who carried his temporary rank over into his civil existence, and there, so far as was consistent with what he supposed to be good form (a complicated ritualistic business with the Captains Small) hugged it to his bosom. He is Heaven's appointed professional soldier of the less efficacious sort, born into the wrong family or at the wrong time; this fact he would never have realized but for his temporary commission; and as soon as he had found it out, his occupation was gone. Upon the ordinary decent citizen who fought in it the War had the effect of a powerful and disagreeable tonic. He profited by this, so far as he could and then promptly forgot it as completely as he might. To Captain Small it was all his life.

There are probably thousands of him. In him the smaller sorts of public school, the secondary schools with charters upon which they elaborately insist, came to full flower and justified for a space their obscure pretensions. It was the custom to adore him as it is now the custom to revile—to such extremes we are flung at the alternating requirements of our directors of opinion. Perhaps, indeed, he is not such a pitiable object as the more sensitive of us are inclined to credit. We read into him all sorts of refinements which he is too coarse-grained to have any apprehension of, and too flabby to acquire if he had. By hypothesis he is not himself sensitive; and he did at least function at his uttermost height for four years. And if he must pay for that—so must the rest of us, who, as like as

not, never had any fun, had perhaps even the reverse of fun.

One wonders what could possibly have happened to the Captains Small had it not been for the War. Would they all have been absorbed into small clerkships in large firms and the simpler grades of the Civil Service? Did the hour breed them spontaneously? At any rate, the hour found them and primed them for the event and now they are dismissed to poke about for flotsam on the beaches of the world. What was required of them was exactly what their training could give, and all that it could give—good team-work, stiff upper-lips and the readiness to die well.

On the whole, he decided, the cure had been a success. Though the fear of appearing priggish or unsociable had let him in for an occasional binge, especially when he went into North Bromwich to get his hair cut, he had managed, as he put it himself, to keep fairly straight, circumventing the craving which still periodically assailed him by the cunning stratagem of allowing no liquor to enter the house when the supply that was in it when his treatment began had been exhausted, and never taking a drink unless he had earned one. This restriction had been enforced by a secret device known only to himself by which he recognized in his own mind the existence of four distinct persons; the first, a rollicking free-handed youth, weak, of course, to a fault, but with no real vice in his nature; the second a fatherly middle-aged man, sympathetic and deeply versed in the weaknesses of human nature, who regarded the first with the paternal severity of an experienced company commander toward a wayward recruit who meant no harm and

might some day make a good soldier; and a third impartially keeping the ring, so to speak, for the struggle between the one's sense of discipline and the other's frailty, whom a fourth Captain Small (or all the Captain Smalls together) regarded as commanding officer. By this happy convention, which owed its symbolism to the only kind of life he really understood, his mind had become a kind of perpetual orderly room in which the three divided personalities formally conversed:

'What? Small here again? Usual thing, I suppose? Have you anything to say for yyourself?'

'I'm sorry, sir. It just happened to be my birthday. It won't occur again.'

'Very well. About turn! Next time you won't get off so easily.'

And next time: 'You remember what I said, Small. Three days C.B. And you may think yourself damned lucky not to have got field punishment.'

The question seems to arise whether even the unprepossessing Captain Antrim is not a better specimen of humanity than this barrack-room day-dreaming jellyfish; the Antrims' devastating little habits are at worst no more than pathological exaggerations of failings not altogether unrecognized by the good old English tradition. The peacetime Captains Small are arrant newcomers to these strong silent islands.

... He found to his surprise that he had more money to spare and bought a new trench-coat, in whose shoulder-straps, for his own satisfaction, he pierced three holes for the stars that denoted his retiring rank. *Cultivate new intellectual interests*, the pamphlet urged him. That was even more difficult. Intellect wasn't his line. But he made a shot at it, all

the same with the help of a dictionary. Unluckily the small library which his aunt had left at Orchard Cottage consisted for the most part of evangelical books of devotion, and he couldn't make headway with those. But he read, for the first time, Scott and some tattered volumes of Dickens, in which he discovered to his delight a world whose values were very near to his own, a recognizable world of sawdust-strewn tap-rooms and hard-drinking ostlers and jolly good fellows with hearts of gold and charmingly familiar frailties, to say nothing of pure-minded young women (whom he identified, sentimentally, with Susan Lorimer) and touching renunciations, like that of Sidney Carton, who loved and lost and 'took a drop' like himself.

The portrait is diabolically accurate of Mr. Everyman, returned hero, resting after a long war and thinking he desires another one. No adverse commentary on modern warfare can improve upon a contemplation of the types which wage it successfully—and contentedly.

Encouraged by the success of these literary adventures he took a plunge into the muddy spate of war-books which began to appear at that moment, and the fury which these chronicles aroused in him enhanced his own growing self-respect and self-esteem by emphasizing the contrast between himself and his comrades-in-arms and the neurotic, disillusioned conscripts who wrote them. *He* wasn't disillusioned by anything—thank God!—but the meanness and sloppiness of the generation for which he had shed his blood—the internationalists and Bolshies and Conchies who now emerged from their funk-holes. The fellows with whom he had fought

had more guts than that. And the conviction that he himself belonged to a sterner race with (relatively) clean minds and a simple, untarnished faith in the British Army and the villainy of all its enemies, made him hold his head high, according with the ideals of his tentative reformation. It was up to him, clearly, to show the new world what the men of the old B.E.F. were like. He would march out in face of its ill-veiled contempt with banners flying. And when the time came, as it would. . . .

Captain Small, even he, has his minor complications and berufflements, which serve to ornament the plot. Nevertheless, his simple soul is used only as chorus. Indeed, only one elder participates in the involved gyrations of the neurotic young, and he is far from a Mr. Everyman. Mr. Bulgin, maker of nails and other small domestic instruments, a prey to beauty, descends discredibly into the sex-ridden arena and there undergoes metamorphosis, changing from an industrious serpent into a romantic goat, without getting appreciably closer to the object of his admiration.

Except in his business Mr. Bulgin had never been romantic. According to the family custom he had married young and remained faithful to his wife. This fidelity did not imply any particular virtue in Mr. Bulgin. It was the normal conduct of a well-to-do Midland *bourgeois* amid a society unmercifully interested in the private lives of its members, and in which conventional behaviour counted as a business asset. A man who ran after women—or, far worse, after one woman—was considered to have taken the first downward step toward bankruptcy—the ultimate deadly sin. One signed the marriage

register as one signed a deed of partnership; one entered into matrimony with a woman as one went into business with a man, and made profits or children, as the case might be, as a matter of course.

Looking back on the early marriage in the light of his present restlessness, Mr. Bulgin was astonished to find how much he had taken it for granted. If the society of the first Mrs. Bulgin had allayed a physical need it had certainly had for him no æsthetic significance. Even by Halesby standards which were not exacting, the late Mrs. Bulgin had never been a beauty; but even supposing she had been beautiful, Mr. Bulgin thought, it was doubtful if he would have had time—or even inclination—to notice it.

So Mr. Bulgin amorous. His idiom, his mode of love, is preserved recognizably in that of the young pups, but his dialectic, as one might say, is more direct:

That evening she was as unapproachable as any flame-girdled Brunnehilde, and Mr. Bulgin, though physically equipped for the part of a *Helden-tenor*, was, temperamentally, no Siegfried.

By the end of a week of this nonsense his bewilderment gave way to a smarting conviction that Susan was making a fool of him. If only for the sake of his self-respect he would have to assert himself and teach her a lesson. . . .

Mr. Bulgin has also been, in his different kind, a King David of our days and has a short way with triangles; he has despatched Susan's Dick to a distant factory and set him in the forefront of the industrial battle.

He drove up to 'Chatsworth' determined to call her bluff, for he declined to believe that her attitude was anything else. If he trembled as he knocked at the door that evening it was not so much with passion as with righteous indignation. It filled him with anger to find her at the same old game; she was full of an enthusiastic letter which she had received from Dick by the morning's post, and even insisted on reading him extracts from it, with coy suppressions of the endearments with which it was sprinkled. He sat glowering at her, chewing the cud of resentment, with the spindly tea-table between. There were moments in which he felt like kicking the whole lot to smithereens.

'Isn't that splendid?' she cried, when she had finished her reading. 'He's so keen about everything!'

Mr. Bulgin did not answer. He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. The blood was in his head. He stood there, heavily impending, like a bull that snorts and lashes its tail, and when, at last, he spoke, his voice had an ugly snarl in it.

'Look here, Susie,' he said, 'I'm just about fed up with this.'

Susan, sketched inimitably there, half-hidden in the clinging dark, is properly the subject of the book. Her curious psychological changes under the crescendo of influences which is bent upon her, beginning with the thrill of pillion-riding which is almost in the blood of her class (the class of 1905, I should judge, just before the hike), and culminating in accident, child-birth and alleged murder, are drawn with exquisite definition, especially her curious momentary devulgarization. This is her normal self, so far as self it can be called.

Of the five people present only three were aware of the recent emotional relationship of Mr. Bulgin to herself. In the mantelpiece mirror beyond Mr. Bulgin's shoulder she had caught sight of her own face, small and pale in the gaslight above the fur collar, with huge tragic eyes, and had realized how perfectly cast she was to hold the stage in this *scène à faire*.

Mr. Bulgin here, perhaps I should explain, has emerged from the box-of-chocolates stage but has not yet made his overt rush.

With an instinct that never deserted her on such occasions she proceeded to dramatize herself and 'show off' for the benefit of the other actors, George Lorimer and Bulgin, and to the bewilderment of an audience, ignorant of the scene's inner meaning, consisting of Aunt Edna and Dick. Accordingly, for Dick's sake she became seductive with Mr. Bulgin, for Mr. Bulgin's affectionate with Dick, while for Aunt Edna she staged a version of 'Cinderella,' in which the ill-treated heroine returned to flaunt the independence of a brilliant marriage and the obvious devotion of every available male before the grimmest of 'Ugly Sisters.'

What a lovely glossing light all this throws on those too little known and often obscure, but invaluable chronicles of the lower middle classes and their doings which constitute the popular Sunday press. Through Susan, too, we see into their arts:

As a matter of fact, Susan only pretended to enjoy Wagner. . . . Though well-marked rhythms stimulated her and made her beat time with her foot, she

was almost tone-deaf, as Dick might have judged (if he had not been similarly afflicted) from the dance-tunes and theme-songs she hummed out of tune in the kitchen. The only music that really moved her was that oily drooping note of the saxophone combined with the negroid, nasal whine of Broadway Jews which had imposed itself in those days, through the medium of the sound film, on the whole British Empire, from Inverness to New Zealand. Even this appealed to her senses less as music than as the accepted accompaniment of her ideals of fashionable life and romantic love. She was happiest, indeed, when the Queen's Hall closed down and the Broadcasting Corporation's arbiters of elegance 'took her over' to the Savoy Hotel, whence she could hear the clapping of the dancers' hands when the saxophone ceased to whine and almost feel she was taking part in those brilliant gatherings where 'titled' men and 'society' girls (in the latest Channels and Mollynoos) performed the most difficult modern steps with an 'easy nonchalance' in a 'gala atmosphere' of coloured balloons and paper streamers and popping champagne-corks. She could imagine all that quite easily, for Muriel O'Brien had seen the New Year in at the Savoy with Harry Levison, and had told her all about it. What a brilliant, carefree life men like Harry Levison must lead! To dance in *chic* rendezvous, without having to think about money.

The Broadway Jews (it is the Broadway in America which is in question) come in for a rather harder knock than it is at all usual with our author to bestow upon their race. He is in the usual way too much the scientist to dislike even his Antrims. The Jews, ordinarily, in fact, he tends to admire rather than

not, as perhaps the biologist must, since they breed with such beautiful accuracy. This Harry Levison, the book's messenger of Fate, is almost sympathetically drawn:

He was beautifully dressed, with a large black butterfly tie, a white waistcoat with diamond-set onyx buttons, and pearl studs in his shirt-front, each bigger than the tie-pin affected by Mr. Morris, and his plastered hair was as sleek and dark as his onyx buttons. When he saw her he smiled the sad and beautiful smile that is seen upon Jewish lips. 'At last!' he said, as he took her hand and kissed it (Fancy Dick kissing anyone's hand!) like a foreign nobleman.

Young field naturalists, out with their killing-bottle, should note that get-up, which goes down on the promenade at Brighton or Brightlingsea even better than a motor-bicycle.

Dick, the centre if not the subject, is the best thing in the book. And like so many of Mr. Brett Young's chief characters, he is not detachable for quotation. When we have said that he is symbolized by an object known in his environment as an old Brunstonian tie, we have said much. But, rather unexpectedly, we have not said all. It cannot be too much insisted upon that Dick is a countryman by birth, and that underneath his conforming stupidity there is concealed an amazed newcomer to the urban social ladder. There is something likable about Dick, tie or no tie, all through; and when his troubles come upon him he is promoted to the rank of a high tragic figure. Indeed at the end of the book Mr. Brett Young makes one of his magnificent extra efforts (not in this case a recovery

since the book has at no time failed in its strong if vulturine flight) and every single character, Mr. Bulgin fading into the background, stands out and is steeped in the deep auxiliary tragical light—even police-sergeants and K.C.'s.

There is an idyllic chapter or so, passed in the vicinity of Ludlow, in which the country is done as supremely well as ever; and Aunt Judith Pennington, who has not been able to get at Dick early enough, is radiant among country gentlewomen. I cannot help mentioning too the curious, quite undetachable character who is the wife of old Uncle George. This faded harridan, from a very humdrum and forbidding habit, suddenly emerges once or twice into utter unselfish grandeur—the kind of thing that catches at the hardest heart, even at the reviewer's. I know nothing like those moments in fiction, unless it might be Mrs. Furnival's little glorious but otherwise dissimilar selflessnesses in *Cold Harbour*.

Some traces of Aunt Judith's astringent charm leaks over into the remainder of the story, her rural depths dignifying the little mean house in the North Bromwich outskirts; and Ludlow's carillon bathes the pretty sub-ironical end of all the trouble.

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XXVII

THE BRAZEN BOUGH

LEGENDS throughout the ages have sprung spontaneously from the great hearts of nations, at the imperious behests of vast racial complexes, no doubt, but spontaneously to all appearance all the same; and if it were not for the facile and, as it were, subsidized competition of the drab newspaper truth, doubtless they would still so spring. Indeed in moments of soul-shaking national stress one may still sense the mythopœic movement in the air—as in the case (as the Departments say) of the Russians in Scotland, not to mention the gallant and apparently honest, but somewhat self-conscious attempt by a later-day Silurist to foist angels on the front-line.

For every people and for each conditioned group of human beings there exists its own sort of legend, its own pet fairy-tale. Thus, to the Celt the idea of lost lands, especially drowned lands and steeples out to sea has always been peculiarly attractive; and nothing could have been more apt or in its way a neater tribute from a newer to an older tradition, than the materializing of Mansergh's dream in a Welsh valley. Trades and professions, too, have always had their typical figures and tales—forms arising as variations made by day-dreaming apprentices on, as often as not, the Sir Richard Whittington theme. Saint Crispin is the cobbler's visioned pattern, Cinderella the scullion's, Sir Galahad the scout-master's and so forth—all, let us hasten to affirm, the products duly of the foulest

complexes, but very pretty and pleasant nevertheless, as are flowers on dunghills.

The late Alfred Austin, a former poet laureate, sang of Nature:

She sins upon a larger scale
Because she is herself more large. . . .

That closely reasoned couplet would be true also, I feel, of human nature, of man in the bulk, of peoples and races. And as we sin so we dream. Perhaps the League of Nations will set up a pyschotherapeutic ethnological laboratory.

And, narrowing down, one might say that there is a typical, professional symbolic figure for novelists *de race*, a figure into the delineation of which they drift naturally, under whose guise they say their most private say (the product of their secret novelistic imaginings, which lie far deeper than such things as opinions and beliefs and desires for sales). This is the projection, I suppose, of the divergent, primordial, quasi-creative stirrings of sap in them—the Prometheus complex. Or, if we may adopt the valuable if indistinct terminology of Professor Jung, let us distinguish and say that the present instance of it, Tregaron, is the emblem of the romantic extraverted writer who tends towards the novel as the creators of Faust and Hamlet, classic introverted writers, tended towards the drama. (It may be claimed that Shakespeare was a romantic—but hardly, I think, with justice of the writer of great tragedies.)

These projections crop up all over the world, wherever the novel has a foothold, but the soil of the literature of England is especially pungent with them,

these gallant, stupid, aggressive characters, designed at birth by the god of battles for a military career and abandoned by some mischance to the petty spite of agricultural wits and potentates, and small-town farming intelligences. The murder of his sweetheart by a bell-hop has been regarded by some (unjustly as many think) as the typical American tragedy; with undeniably greater justice this traditional thick-set figure of the strong, sour yeoman, making money, desiring women, fighting man and nature and himself, and by infinitesimal degrees being beaten amid the gathering jeers of yokels—this slow culmination of greed and ataxy might be called the English tragedy.

The theme, worked out with due consideration, even by aspirant novelists (as several have discovered) will nearly always produce a good rich book, even in the absence of any kind of ameliorating grace, a gratifying particularity which Dr. Cronin demonstrated in *Hatter's Castle*, the latest of its embodiments. There is a trait in the portrait which seems to hark out to the English tongue and the English temperament. And yet, as if careless amid his profusion, Mr. Brett Young when he came to use it, as inevitably he had to come, long-trained in simple legendary uses, chose to make it almost subsidiary to his crowning vision: the founding at last and the flooding of the Elan Reservoir. But whether this was a risk or no, these two great themes bind together to make a book of the first strength. Many of his larger works have fallen into pieces, iridescent but separate, by weight or diversity and lack of connective tissue; *The House Under The Water* stays triumphantly in one piece, despite its many threads and divisions.

XXVIII

‘THE HOUSE UNDER THE WATER’

THE HOUSE UNDER THE WATER stays in one piece, despite its great size and superficial diversity. This it achieves by its inner compression, and by its use of Time.

A great deal has been written about Time and the Novel, particularly since the long novel made its welcomed reappearance among us; and most of the writing has been accompanied by large indicative gestures but unaccompanied by technical explanation. We are directed to *War and Peace* or *L'Education Sentimentale*, with mystical insistency and left to marvel in a mysterious hush. Even Mr. Percy Lubbock is unprepared with minute exposition on this subject. It is a large subject, perhaps the largest in all criticism, and doubtless at some stage or other one must lose one's way in it. Doubtless, too, if one knew how it was done, one would do it and not talk about it, since few kinds of creation can be so satisfactory as these successful sallies against the universal adversary. Yet it does not seem to be entirely beyond the reach of critical analysis even though, ultimately, each man must complete the dissection for himself. Usually, in the book which successfully makes use of Time, every advantage is taken of the incidentals of ageing, of slight alterations in idiosyncrasies and modes of thought as evinced by the human characters; and the very successful book does this more subtly than the others.

There are, however, external devices, for which the cinematograph has given us distant parallels, tricks comparable with the 'cuts-back' and 'close-ups' and the like, presentational manoeuvres which greatly assist. These are less easily detected and co-ordinated by the reader. And then there is the elastic management and sympathetic arrangement of prose, a very much rarer usage, and one which perhaps really does defeat all explanatory attempts. There can be no golden rules about it in the nature of the case. Each writer will have it his own way, and perhaps it must be seen at work, in each of its manifestations, for all its powers to be realized. But if it is essential to see it at work, I do not know where it can be seen better than in *The House Under The Water*.

This may seem to argue that it is there not wholly successfully employed, since otherwise it would not be manifest. That is an argument which would tend dangerously to the 'breath of God' theory of inspiration; but I think one may go so far as to admit that there is a flamboyancy about the book which many tastes might reject if it did not succeed completely in its object which is to invest the whole with a general sense of vigour, outside and beyond the human characters, with a rising of sap, a reverberation of universal life, which can then be directed into channels of death or decrepitude as the plan of the book may direct. But I think that most tastes will find that it does so succeed.

I should say that Time may be considered to have entered as royally into this book as into *War and Peace* or *The Old Wives' Tale*; and that it is of the essence of the compliment that nothing short of a reading of the book in full can begin to justify it. The prose itself is

full of the movement of Time. And in addition there recur, more susceptible of proof, the variations rung overtly upon the theme of flooding, of all the kinds of flooding in the world—Tregaron's temperament and energy flooding his environments, thridding the hearts of his opponents and sometimes damming out into sinister standing pools; the movement of the hunt; the spreading and retraction of the aristocratic principle in sympathy with the money-markets; the seasons swelling down the glens; the mounting of fancies in the minds of the daughters; and always, cumulose in a sunset monument of mists, the piling-up of the days.

To arrive at any complete sense of all this, the book must, of course, be read. Yet nevertheless it is so full of ingenious devices of the tertiary, or prose, sort that it might serve in extract as a text-book for the fashionable long-novel writing. Particularly effective and charmingly lyrical is what might be called the large wedge, the slow broadening out of the kind of interim passage which Flaubert, for example, used so extraordinarily well although he used it in a few short lines, with pauses, as it were, between them.

Three times Spring came and laughed in at the windows of Pozzo Reale, grilled windows, looking down from a spur of the Neapolitan Apennine on to the plains of Campania and a curved horizon of sea. Three times in mid-February foaming billows of almond-bossom broke against them; grey stones were dressed with trailing rosemary; lizards started; in moments of sunlit calm one heard the murmur of bees. March winds blew the almond petals away like spindrift and made fertile the pink-blossomed peach; a moist sun sucked up scent from the growing grass; every hollow glowed with a purple spilth of



THE GREAT DAM IN THE ELAN VALLEY

anemones and orchids. The mad sun of March bred thunder that woke the serpents—they were timid, harmless creatures, the sisters said, and approved by St. Francis; but the girls were afraid and avoided the rocks they haunted. In April cherry-bloom broke in a second wave; grown corn stood up slim and piercingly green under ashen olives; the vines pushed out rosy buds that smelt of must. In May, golden orioles whistled like boys and gorged themselves on the ripening cherries. Quails filled the night with their stuttering calls; tired nightingales sang at midday; the hot groves began to simmer with cicada-chirpings—and lo, it was Summer!

(Three Springs came to Phil's secret garden, and dwelt there unseen, and vanished. . . .)

It is a conventional decorative method, almost a Christmas-card formula like another, but it is a very charming one; and if it is a trifle flamboyant there, so is the Italian spring.

Four times the Italian lands subsided into their long siesta of blue noons and milk-warm nights. Sometimes, indeed, a white *scirocco* arose and smote them with hot gusts like the breath of a lion's throat—on such days the girls were glad to find refuge in the convent's cool, vaulted chambers—yet, save for these bursts of Saharan violence, the season was wholly serene, with drowsy day after day and week after week of shimmering peace. The circlet of sun-bleached Apennine grew dim with heat. The rich plains slept, and the sea was a lazuline lake where blue islands swam or, lifted in a mirage, seemed to float like clouds.

(Four times black heather bloomed and the little horned sheep were driven down to whiten the folds of Nant Escob at shearing-time. . . .)

Notice how delicately but insistently seasonably the prose changes; it is no longer charming but gathers quite another temper.

Amid the cypresses birds sang no more. The migrants—or such of them as had not been riddled with small-shot—had drifted northward; but in vineyards and olive-groves invisible peasants broke out into the wild roulades and quavers of Campanian love-songs. Down there the resurgent vine thrust out tendrils and climbed to the sun; clusters formed and swelled and reddened; the globes of the peach grew big with juice; the crimson flesh of the fig was ready to burst; till suddenly, as though this plethora of growth were intolerable to nature, the sky crashed in thunder again, the rains broke, and summer was gone.

(Four times red admirals drunkenly sunned themselves on the fallen fruit in Phil's garden, and Autumn salmon leapt in the pool below Cabn Mawrion. . . .)

It is hateful to sully this lovely flexible piece of idyllic prose by preaching over it; but, since it is only on those terms that one may permit oneself to quote it in full, notice the going-out of the letter 's' and the coming-in of the letter 'r,' the slight introduction of human interest, reeds to be taken up crescendo in the last movement (really the musical analogy is impossible to avoid just here), and yet all the time the obstinate adherence to the solid earth.

The winds that blew from Morocco were moisture-laden; the chestnut forests were drenched with rain that ran down to waste in the tideless, tepid sea. Euroclydon—that was the wind that wrecked *San’ Paolo*—snatched and howled at the windows of Pozzo Reale like a wild beast. Bagpipe-players came down from hamlets of the Abruzzi; they wore cloaks of stuff green with age, and, for shoes, thonged goat-skins; for three weeks before Christmas they played the Music of the Madonna, a plaintive pastoral air a little out of tune. Behind them the stony circlet of Apennine rose mantled with snow. In those days the convent seemed far colder than Nant Escob. Its walls, built ten feet deep to frustrate rapine, its floors paved with travertine, seemed to radiate cold into the high-vaulted rooms on whose ceilings plump cherubim shivered. Its jealously-grated windows forbade the entrance of sunshine. The building became one vast and stony refrigerator. The girls warmed their hands over charcoal braziers and suffered from chilblains; but they knew that they would not have long to wait for Spring.

(Four blacker Winters gripped Forest Fawr in a vice and choked the mouth of Dol Escob with drifts of snow. . . .)

The vowel-sounds have grown shorter and thinner; the letter ‘i’ comes into its own. Particularly the unsettling value of the boisterous Greek word and the remote Biblical reference may be noticed, and how all the worlds begin to leak together. A beautifully logical piece of work—but it is the logic of music rather than of common sense.

So much, then, for Time, which controls the con-

fluent inundations of the book. This is an example of the combination of the afflatus of Tregaron with the flooding motif:

Tregaron's energy swept through the valley like a Spring flood. It had been dammed up so long that nothing could resist its torrential impatience. Lucrezia and the girls, adjusting themselves to their new surroundings, had the feeling of being marooned on a rock that was stripped by spray and subject at infelicitous moments, to sudden, complete inundation. Lucrezia had weathered some storms before, but none to compare with this, though Tregaron's mood, for the moment, was mercifully benignant. Whatever was in him discharged itself in a spate of words and physical activity; it was no longer compressed in a closed focus, poisoning the whole household. As soon as supper was finished he would shut himself up in the library among his papers; it was long after midnight before the stairs creaked beneath his brisk step. Then he flung himself down on the bed and slept like a child for four hours—till the first streak of dawn, when he left her as abruptly as he had arrived, and pulled his sons out of bed. It pleased Lucrezia²—if she had not already outlived any feelings of that kind—to know that he had no relations with other women—though that, of course, in the nature of things, couldn't last.

Tregaron is the 'milord anglais' of the early eighteenth century to the life. This illusion, which assists the final onslaught of Time, is itself assisted by the fact that he has no past, except one campaign with Garibaldi. Time has stood still with him (as we see him) in order that it may move now more rapidly.

It was not in Tregaron's nature to take a blow without hitting back. He regarded the river with an almost personal enmity. Though that devil could not be wholly tamed it should pay him tribute. His mind swooped back to the idea of exploiting its power which had flattered his vaulting imagination at the time of his first visit to Nant Escob. That vision of a house ablaze with electric light was doomed to fade on its first contact with reality. He procured estimates for turbines and dynamos and wiring and lamps from a firm in North Bromwich. The proposed expenditure appalled him. Still, power was running to waste that might surely be harnessed in some less ambitious manner and replace coal-fed steam for the ordinary uses of the estate—cutting chaff, breaking cake, threshing corn, sawing wood.

So much for power; and now we come to that negation of gentility, that wrongness of instinct, that instinctive turning to the not-done, which so often accompanies it, and is to be found, besides, in natural forces.

Wood . . . there was an inspiration! Brooding over his valley he saw, on the lower slopes, many thousands of cubic feet of matured oak and fir and unthinned coppices of larch; potential pit-props and shipwrights' timber and builders' beams, all standing ripe for the saw-mill! No vision of ravaged hill-sides disquieted Tregaron. The question was not æsthetic but economic. He wanted money. He, who had always made a boast of despising it, now talked about nothing else—which seemed odd to Lucrezia and the rest of them, for surely he had never before been so comfortably placed? On the contrary. His hay had gone floating to the sea;

winter-feed must be bought for his stock. The cost of the move to Nant Escob had exceeded all calculations; his little capital ebbed away like the dwindling river; they were hanging by finger-nails on the edge of bankruptcy, he declared, and might soon topple over. Even the problem of importing a new foreign governess for Philippa would have to be shelved. Lucrezia and Philippa, for different reasons, heard this with relief. Diana's heart fell, too; she wanted money to go to London and study music.

Time by a kind of treachery is made to work with great force in this Tregaron, Time with its auxiliaries of alteration, the periodical influence of the earth, the little envies and mighty aspirations of men, the risings and fallings of the values of things—and locomotor ataxy. I think one may say 'without fear of contradiction' that Tregaron is the finest example ever drawn of this traditional figure of tragedy—although there is always Balzac round the corner, waiting lustfully to live again in just such generalizations as these. The other people are, without exception, in their very well contrasted ways, no less excellent. Tregaron's wife, the Italian noblewoman married beneath herself, is very like Napoleon's mother; indeed they have so many features in common and the names—Lucrezia Roccanera, Laetitia Ramolino—fall so sisterly in a lilt together, that I am tempted to suggest that the resemblance is deliberately contrived. But that is as may be. This harsh, race-proud, avaricious old woman breaks down at the end of the book, as simply and beautifully as the old harridan in *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington*. So did not, I fancy, on any occasion, Laetitia the Corsican.

There are three daughters (the mystical number again, again beautifully differentiated, and again enhanced with triangular usages) and two sons, one Lucrezia's and one her predecessor's. Here are the girls:

'I can't *help* being always hungry,' Philippa protested. 'And if you want to know the truth, I *can* dance—divinely. I can waltz and reverse as well. You look and I'll show you!'

She began to waltz solemnly, in the middle of the room, to the time of a tune in her head.

'The child dances quite well,' Diana thought, as she stared at her. 'Why is it that I, to whom rhythm means so much, am such a poor dancer—while Virginia, who hasn't a note of music in her body and can't sing without going flat, seems born to it? It's because,' she told herself, 'Virginia expresses everything through her body—that's all she's got—while I have a soul and can put it into my playing. In twenty years' time,' she thought, 'when Virginia's body is old and wrinkled, my soul will be just the same as now or even finer.' But she wished she could dance as well as Virginia all the same. . . .

Nothing could be more sweet and natural and more expert than their growth, loves and decays, not even the adventures, amours and ageing of the two women in *The Old Wives' Tale*, although it is true that alteration is not carried so far in the present instance. Indeed, so ever-present is Time that there is hardly a neglected, shrunken corner in the fabric of the book but holds its hurrying minuscular tragedy; and the prose-style, after the adequacies of *My Brother Jonathan* and *Jim Redlake* and *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington*, fills out

with throbbing pulses and becomes all things to all the intensive workings of these rich and vital themes. This is another of its many moods:

Not one dance, but many. First the old-fashioned waltzes of Gungl and the newer Waldteufel with spirits of quick Viennese fire and slow, languorous raptures. She played with her head thrown back (Tregaron's gesture) and her eyes, gazing over the piano to the panelled wall, saw there, in a concave mirror, a diminished reflection of all that was passing behind her, like the image a crystal-gazer sees in her sphere. This coloured pattern, which moved in obedience and in time to her music, seemed to her like a ghostly emanation of the notes that she played. She had invoked it and given it life; it was her creation; she had only to stop and it would lose its reality and cease to exist. The moving wraiths were so small that she could name none of them save only Virginia, whose white dress detached itself from the rest.

So tremulous, delicately and memorably is the littlest incident translated, and made to join the general flux.

The management of metaphor throughout the book is worthy of a recondite study. Mirrors and water-surfaces naturally abound; but there are also all sorts of continued passages, as in the few pages which describe the girls beginning to employ their arts to ensnare men, pages in which the air becomes faintly heavy and as if saddened, with the far clash of weapons, a typical Tregaron motif:

Virginia kept her bed for a fortnight. . . . 'Yet how utterly lovely she is,' Phil thought, again and again, 'and how astonishingly gentle!'

Indeed, though the victim for whom she had whetted her beauty had beaten his retreat, Virginia still kept it bright with a kind of hallucinated piety.

That physical perfection was the only thing she had left, and apparently she found some solace in preserving the weapon for its own sake, sitting up for hours at a time with her mirror before her, arranging her hair and tending her shapely hands with the absorption of a craftsman contemplating his own creation.

But these are incidentals almost as unnoticeable in the general vigorous crepitation of growth as recited verse in a tropical forest. On every page the book is rich with an English climate of the most transcendental (and yet most credible) description. Here at last Mr. Brett Young has permitted himself to enter majestically into his promised land, and now at last he really justifies his inheritance. To begin quoting in evidence of this would be fatal. Let me give just one touch more, and so away:

August came with alternations of thundery heat and deluge. Wild raspberries ripened; the heather glowed and faded, and its forerunner, the rosy willow-herb, blew white with tassels of flossy silver. The elms in the lower valley grew tarnished at their tips; the beeches in conflagration flared to heaven, and the birches were no longer plumes of smoke, but fountains of bright flame. In mid-September the hot sky cracked like a broken bowl and its water descended; the river roared past in a rufous flood, and torrents, unchained on the mountain, hurled themselves down to meet it, carrying away in their passage the foundations of Tregaron's new road.

Even that essential seasonal touch is not allowed to waste itself, but contributes its delicate jolt to the movement of the whole. The descriptive note goes deep, and I cannot resist this one example (positively the last) of how it penetrates even into a conversation on coal:

As he sat at Tregaron's side or prowled to and fro, Furnival talked incessantly of the great colliery that was to make their fortunes; he brought with him specimens of fossilized tree-ferns, remains of the gigantic reptiles that had swarmed and blundered through the steamy swamps and forests into whose black sepulchre they were blasting and cutting their way. No human eye had ever before set sight on them, Furnival said; it grieved him to think that the men who now beheld them were not figures of an heroic age nor even noble savages, but dirty, pot-bellied little proletarians in billy-cock hats. He made coal (like everything else that his vivid imagination touched) a theme for romance; his fancy flowered to embellish its potential uses; no man who had handled coal before had ever exploited it as he would, extracting from its very dust the products of dry distillation; explosive spirits to drive the new motor-cars; flaming gases whose heat should feed the blast of furnaces; rainbow hues of aniline; innumerable beneficent drugs of the coal-tar series. 'There is only one sin against the Holy Ghost,' he proclaimed, 'and that is waste!'

Even the later magic of that Mr. Furnival, here a young man as yet unpractised in the occult, would not be extensive enough (as it would probably be too scholarly) to introduce retrospectively into the Carboniferous Period evidence of the existence of dino-

saurs. There was, of course, nothing animal more than a very few feet in length in those steaming ages of vegetable ascendancy. It is as very rare for Mr. Brett Young to miss a descriptive opportunity as to go wrong in one, particularly when it can be based upon a sound and scientific basis; but possibly the largest sentient things in that gloom were toads—and dragon-flies.

It is in fact 'Fatherless Bairn,' the flooded Sedgebury Main, that finally kills Tregaron off; it takes that well-trying piece of the mechanical god-like, which had a part in Aunt Cathie's catastrophe in *Portrait of Clare*, to do it. But he is an unconscionable time a-dying. And in the meantime all the other passions in the book find their levels; in the presence of Tregaron in full career all smaller impulses sang small. In his decline and at his death they gush out with noises of relief but also with a suggestion of having wearily grown old in their seclusion. There is something faded in all that was fine and young and promising and down the core of glowing and vigorous scenes of the Welsh hills love loiters palely. Yet nevertheless, it is easier for Jack to have Jill than for the man to have his mare again. The world must wag even though nobody quite sees why. And so, while the relict turns to the wall, the loves of the triangles are capped with a secondary delight. While Lucrezia faces the prospect of a difficult dowagerhood among her Italian relatives, while the mountains brood over a new and mighty lake, the citizens of North Bromwich rejoice in the bath, Rob settles down with his Janet, Phil with her soldier, Veronica with her decrepit count and Di with her solemn sober farmer. 'Many waters cannot quench love neither can the floods drown it.'

XXIX

THE DEPTHS OF THE COUNTRY

PERHAPS 'depths' must be read in a Pickwickian sense; and yet at no very great stretch of words one may still speak understandably of deep English country; for there is a nobler and a fuller England within gingerbeer-bottle throw of the motor-roads than the jerry-building world dreams of, or the motoring tripper, tied to his engine as he is, will ever picnic in. After all, there may be a Providence in all this scampering neurosis. The poorer, younger Penningtons, scared off and, it may be, with the rudiments of healthy disgust working in them, are developing a tendency to forsake their motor-bicycle aspirations and return to the use of their feet, a custom which may bring them, or their children, at last within call of life—unless, indeed, they die out by the wayside under the tonnage of those stupendous haversacks which their uniform regulations appear to insist upon. Perhaps by this means the evolutionary principle is at its work with them, to prepare a harder species for their eventual inheritance of a universe of clamouring machinery. And, Penningtons apart, for every grave, stone-faced village or black- and white-hamlet which the arterial roads deliver over to the contractor, they leave twenty, quieter than ever, in a hidden pool.

Such pools lie especially thick over the counties of Worcestershire and Shropshire; and I believe that, with no greater stretches than we have already assumed, we may trace the new tendency for Mr.

Brett Young to settle his imagination upon country a little further from the border than hitherto although still within sight of Uffdown, and upon the new conflict (new to him) between the whirlpools of traffic and the backwaters of Edwardian, even Victorian calm, to his settling in 1933, the year of the conception of *This Little World*, at Craycombe, a backwater between Evesham and Pershore, for his English summers.

A dignity, older and more solid, lies about this country, too, which all the resources of the main roads, in full blast, face to face, cannot quell. Such a great petrol track, for instance, flaunts its business through the lovely village of Broadway, and there may be seen to throw up its eddies and their refuse against stone façades which appear to make no more of it all than Leviathan would make of the measles. Like the houses in *This Little World*, though they compose the village street they appear to retire from it. Broadway, it is true, has a noble ally under its exceptional difficulties, in the radiance which pervades Court Farm. Here, too, dwells and is manifest, a symbol of England—a symbol translated, by an unusual inversion, from California, but translated in the days before California became the rendezvous of the world's sweethearts and the East-ender's Elysium. The spirit of M.A., with one intermission in the calm years of Victoria, dips back to Elizabeth. So does all that country.

Craycombe House, almost a newcomer, built under the Adam tradition if not by the brothers in person, itself is subsumed under this older influence. It seems to fall back, with an aristocratic avoidance, into the countryside, even when one is at its door. Indeed,

the first thing the visitor notices on arriving is neither the house itself, although it is an architectural gem outstanding even in that countryside of treasure, nor its ideal situation, with a beacon hill immediately behind it, Bredon looming six miles away, fruit blossom furlongs deep all around, and the Avon curving sweetly at the bottom of its orchards; he notices first a sort of dim but extraordinarily pervasive streak, apparently encircling the house, which resolves itself for a welcoming second into 'Bailey,' a Blue Bedlington, and then resumes its unceasing and unavailing pursuit of rabbits. From whichever angle one approaches the place thereafter, or from whatever window one looks forth, 'Bailey,' is at once insistently visible and invisible.

And 'Bailey,' the Blue Bedlington, half sheep-dog and half Puck, himself is a good sound English symbol. The Muse alone knows what little things will precipitate a poet's mind. Not that 'Bailey' is without the true English knack of making the most of his size!

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XXX

‘THIS LITTLE WORLD’

SOME distant grumbling threat of the assaults of industrialism and the friends of the Penningtons upon all English scenes has never been very far off in the larger novels. In *This Little World* we are set at the heart of this conflict in its turn by a kind of differentiation; a moment is taken on the curve and a typical lapse is described.

The dice are perhaps just a little unfairly loaded against the village of Chaddesbourne. Its military squire is uncommonly stupid, and his stupid son is uncommonly ‘modern,’ ripping about habitually at ‘seventy’ or so, and harbouring dreams of taking to the air and ‘doing two hundred.’ So far as a reader is allowed to penetrate his skull, he has few other activities or intentions. The kindly, generous, vulgar neighbouring millionaire is too vulgar, too good, too tempting to be true; and probably no group of human beings ever entered so deeply into what amounts to a tacit conspiracy to behave idiotically about money, not even in thick English country. Nor perhaps did ever English village hold quite so many good men run to seed, typically English country figures though such seedy individuals must be allowed to be. Yet, all things considered, I cannot believe that anybody has ever got the English scene and people better into a page, not even Jefferies or Hudson, as in *This Little World* it is got into the greater part of some six hundred.

Nevertheless, the fates muster too soon and move

too fast against Chaddesbourne for easy credibility. At the beginning of 1922 the village is invisible to the tripping eye:

The freight-trains of hardware go clanking and roaring by day and by night, through a gap in the hills five miles eastward of Chaddesbourne village; the main road South, with its metal core of Shropshire granite and its facing of Trinidad pitch, carries perpetually whirring wheels shod with tropical rubber an equal distance to the West; and neither of these two impetuous streams takes heed of Chaddesbourne, which sleeps in the silence midway between them like a green stagnant pool. Even the solitary sign-post which stands where the metal road cuts the track that still links it with Bromsberrow market bears a name scarcely legible, and the grass-grown surface of the lane itself, together with its hesitating contortions, leads the traveller who follows it to fear that he may find himself mired in the cul-de-sac of some farm-yard. In short stretches the lane assumes a promising dignity, with wide verges of grass flanked by oaks that resemble an avenue preparing the eyes for the sight of some stately mansion. Overhead the oak branches meet and are interwoven. . . .

But motor-buses and petrol pumps and rumours of pylons are upon it within a twelvemonth.

Perhaps the unities could be preserved in no other way. Certainly in the result they are beautifully preserved, with the occasional aid of Time (handled magnificently, what there is of his influence) and a malignant bedridden gossip, his auxiliary (who was young once) who descends at a very long remove from the invalid onlooker in *Deep Sea*, and provides commen-

taries as necessary. Perhaps she is a little overdone, this warped woman. At intervals she grows tediously like a serial letter from a retired gentleman to *The Times* newspaper; but, then, perhaps a touch of weariness is needed in the heavy, low-pitched atmosphere. However that may be she exhibits Mr. Brett Young at the height of his creation:

On a mantelpiece draped with a tasselled canopy of maroon chenille, stood an oblong mirror with a rounded top, of the kind through which Alice climbed into the looking-glass world. The mirror, in fact, provided the puzzled observer with a key to the nature of its owner; for, when once the resemblance was grasped, one became aware that Miss Loach herself was the spit and image of the Red Queen. Like that lady, Miss Loach was spare, with the most waspish of waists and the boniest of black satin bodices above an ample black cloth skirt; like her she possessed a bony, angular face, a prominent mouth, alternately grim and pugnacious, narrow eyes, and thin hair, preternaturally dark, secured in a padded bun, by a black silk net of coarse texture; like her Miss Loach was a tyrant and subject to fainting-fits. The only feature in which Miss Loach did not resemble her looking-glass prototype was the queen's remarkable mobility; for Miss Loach was an invalid—the villagers called her a bed-lier—and had rarely, in the last thirty years of her domicile at Chaddesbourne, emerged from her canopied mahogany four-poster in the room above the drawing-room.

This is not to suggest that Miss Loach, at any hour of the day, failed to keep herself informed of what happened in the village, whose minutest activities were the object of her interest and censure.

On the contrary, she was as sensitive as a seismograph. No woman stood gossiping, no man entered the tap-room opposite or the doctor's surgery next door, no schoolboy shouted and no dog barked in the street without the occurrence being reported to her in detail and its cause and significance discussed by her handmaiden and slave, Jane Trost, a less desiccated spinster with the eager bleached look of a ferret, who kept watch, from behind the lace curtains of the window, for the precise purpose. . . .

Miss Loach's notice, goes very deep, even down to the slight but perfectly natural resemblances between the colonel-squire, Ombersley, and his uncle with whom she once flirted :

The mere fact of this family resemblance filled Miss Loach with the sensation of vicarious pride which she felt when she heard the first notes of *God Save the Queen* (the King it was nowadays) and *Rule, Britannia*, or saw the aspiring stone of Worcester Cathedral or (long, long ago) the Round Tower of Windsor Castle, with the royal standard above it, or hounds pattering down the village street, with a huntsman in pink, or a bishop's gaiters.

The book is full of such insights into the heart of a Loach, one of the most English things in the world ; and full, too, of a wondering pity for her futile breed, which is the village doctor's contribution to the god's eye view of the village and is again essentially English :

What reserves of energy were left there he could not guess. Miss Loach had never yet confessed to her age. She was very old. From what he had seen that morning she must surely be older, far older than he

had imagined. She was obstinate, too. Would the unconscious organism, clinging to life, exhibit the same obstinacy as that with which her conscious mind, even in delirium, clung to its principles? . . .

After dinner that evening he found himself considering Miss Loach's life in perspective. It was difficult to imagine that Miss Loach had ever been young. Yet once—heaven knew how many decades ago—she must actually have been a young girl, a girl of the age of Catherine Ombersley. Had she ever been beautiful? Hardly that; by no stretch of imagination could he read beauty into her shrivelled features. Yet, in youth, those black eyes of hers might easily have had charm and a certain dark sprightliness which some man—incredible though it seemed—might have found alluring: and he saw Miss Loach, as a slender figure moving through one of du Maurier's summery drawings—the Vicar's Daughter in a looped skirt and, perhaps, a bustle, swimming over a croquet-lawn decorated with willowy, whiskered young men in cricket-caps. Then he saw that first sprightliness fading, slowly fading; the willowy young men in cricket-caps faded away with it; gay parties no longer came to flirt and play croquet on the lawn; and the one who had walked with her alone between the box-borders had vanished completely, having probably been presented with a living and married a widow with money. Or perhaps (for by now Selby rode his fancy on the snaffle) he had not been a parson at all, but a soldier, who had sailed away and lost his life in some frontier war, leaving Miss Loach's black eyes to lose the softness his whispers had given them; so that now, resigning herself to Fate, she had sought consolation in the service of God and the ecstasies of religion. . . .

It needs no doctor, come from his study to tell those of us who have the habit of vicarages that there was a soldier in the past of Miss Loach.

He saw Miss Loach's soft lips going slightly hardened, with the bloom of a black moustache on them now, as she walked down the street of Chad-desbourne, from the vicarage to the church, from the church to the Sunday-school, from the Sunday-school back to the vicarage. The Vicar's Daughter must always set an example; she must walk erect and sit with her feet together; she must rise in the vicarage pew whenever her father enters the chancel, and keep a strict eye on the school-children; she must watch all the girls whom she taught to say the Catechism grow up like young trees and blossom and fruit, she must dandle their babies and go to their christenings as god mother; but she herself must never think of marrying now, because the race of willowy young men in cricket-caps has become extinct, because her duty is to her father, who is growing old and spills egg on his beard at breakfast and soup on his waistcoat and catches cold easily; it is her duty to stay at home, because, being the Vicar's Daughter, she must never permit familiarity—or even admiration—from superior young farmers or school-teachers who are inclined to be friendly; she must nip such friendliness in the bud; she must become an old maid. . . .

It was with some such soldierly sense of duty to the social order that women in those days marched through and past the marriage-market without the flicker of an eyelid:

And when her father dies at the age of eighty of a stroke, she must not go to live with her sister

in Bournemouth, where the climate is milder, but must stick to her post in Chaddesbourne, because now, more than ever, the decency of the village depends on her example as the only remaining witness of things as they were; she must continue going to church whenever the bell rings, no matter how cold and damp affect her chest, because, if she neglects to do so, the new incumbent—there have been two since her father died—will almost certainly insert into the services the thin end of the wedge called Rome, and, even if she cannot dictate, at least she can show disapproval; and when service is over and people come out of church, she can impart a few words of timely encouragement and advice to her god-daughters' children—her god-grandchildren, so to speak. ('Now don't be contrary,' their mothers say crossly, 'there's nothing to be frightened of. Look up, and shake hands with the lady at once, or I'll give you a smacking!') And, later on, when her legs are too weak to carry her over the road to church, and every winter seems longer and blacker than the last—for the climate has certainly changed since her father's time—she can still insist on the Vicar's coming to see her and tell him how things used to be done and *should* be done, world without end, and be wheeled down the street to the gates of the Hall in a chair, though the ill-mannered children do laugh at her, and crawl back to bed again—to the mahogany four-poster in which her father died; until, suddenly, a stray microbe, blown up from the dust in the road, settles into her lungs and gives the Vicar's Daughter broncho-pneumonia, and the bedroom goes hot and is filled with oddly familiar phantoms, such as old Dr. Weir, who has surely been dead a long time, but with whom she feels strangely at home after so many years of tired loneliness. . . .

The passage is faultlessly assembled. Now, just prior to the immediate agony of the present, in the impending shadow of the immediate future, we are bathed once more in the deepest past. Throughout this book, Mr. Brett Young's attitude is more strictly medical and scientific than ever before; and no less poetical.

Behind the lace curtains of Miss Loach's bedroom window there proceeded a struggle far more intense than any that vexed the Ombersleys. For no less than a fortnight Miss Loach had been fighting for her life. Not the Miss Loach whom Chaddebourne knew as an intelligence always inquisitive and sometimes malignant, like that of a black spider, watchful in the middle of her web: that conscious Miss Loach had long since ceased to impose her censorship on her little world, having given place to another and inner Miss Loach, who revealed herself in snatches of delirium as a tremulous and romantic young lady of the eighteen-seventies; until at last she too faded away, disclosing an ultimate or (as Mr. Winter would have maintained) a penultimate Miss Loach, bereft of all personality malignant or romantic, a mere concatenation of cells in the shape of a little old woman, desperately vitalized by a force, dumb, blind and obscure, called the Will to Live. Dr. Selby, who in spite of his concentration on the material aspects of the case, was an imaginative man, saw this last Miss Loach as a little red ember still obstinately glowing amid a mass of cinder that had already gone black.

It may be that Dr. Selby had been reading Keats' letters; but if he had then the more Dr. Selby he.

Could he breathe on the glow and coax it into an incandescence that would catch the dull cinders and

bring them to life? He did what he could, whipping up the tired heart with strychnine and the doses of brandy which a conscious Miss Loach would have rejected indignantly. He had replaced the amiable and incompetent Jane Trost by two trained nurses; for nursing, in such a case, was more important than medicine, and (since Miss Loach could not afford them) he and Winter had decided to defray the expense. Five or six times a day, and often in the middle of the night, he stole into the room (its windows were wide open now) and bent over the small monkey-like figure, looking, listening with an attention which had little sentiment in it yet partook of tenderness. He had not to deal—as in a case of lobar pneumonia—with an organism gallantly resisting a massed assault which must end, at a moment of crisis, in spectacular victory or defeat. The struggle which he witnessed was a grinding war of attrition in which, up to a certain point, time fought on the side of the defence.

And, miraculously, Miss Loach does survive.

We may assume that the whole sick-bed passage is somewhere near the high-water mark of the English language in excellence of phrasical music. But throughout the book a new note is also distinguishable; or perhaps it would be more true to say that the prose has once again been altered and subdued to a new job:

All Chaddesbourne seemed sunk in July's heavy greenness; a hidden village, its existence only betrayed by ridges of brown thatch emerging from the heaped green like the backs of furry monsters patiently browsing.

'There's no peace, no security in the world like this,' Catherine thought, 'and no beauty so healing.'

Peace that passeth all understanding. No poet can put this into words. Poets need mountains and lakes and spectacular beauties to fit their fine phrases. This land is too quiet; the weight of a word would snap its silence, which, of course, isn't really silence because, when you listen, it tingles. This needs music to express it—but such simple music! Or rather such complicated music! Tristan's shepherd's piping? No, no, that's Kareol, not England—nor even Kareol: I really believe it's Bayreuth. It belongs to footlights and painted scenery. (He was quite right about Wagner. . . .) A folk-tune, perhaps? But folk-tunes become so sophisticated. Ah, yes—it has been done once in music by Elgar: in the little interlude of Falstaff in Shallow's orchard. I wonder if I shall ever hear an orchestra again? Does *he* go to concerts in North Bromwich?

There is harmonical treatment with a vengeance; twittering and colloquial but inexhaustible, like the harmony of Delius. Catherine Ombersley (the colonel's daughter) is falling in love with Dr. Selby, and there is the insinuation that her unwonted village seclusion will drive her to resist the hinted parental opposition. And all the girl's mental activities are there. She does not know much about poetry and quite evidently she has never read any Blunden; but what inspired music-criticism—I do not necessarily suggest sound music-criticism! How prompt and in tune is the discovery of Elgar and of the little exceptional English moment in that somewhat over-ecclesiastical composer; how like finding a tiny medieval alley behind the Brompton Road where all might have been supposed to be genuinely orthodox and

urbane and correctly Victorian! There is about the whole tone of this part of the book, and of much of the rest of it, an impressionist touch which is calculated to persuade the hardest heart back to first motives unresisting, and so on to the desiderated neo-romantic consummations. Let us repeat in passing that a late-Victorianism does indeed still lie about the remoter countryside in limpid and peaceful pools of lace and fustiness.

Description is left rather more than usual to the characters and their utterances. The arts of conversation are much more fully employed than hitherto—and very well and wittily—and often very near to the earth in an impressionist whisper, intended to be strained at and overheard. Here is a random piece of love-making, or rather of the preliminary tilling for love-making:

... Jim was too timid to speak another word till they came to the field where his bullocks were grazing.

'There they are!' he said proudly.

'They look as if they were feeding on moonlight,' she said. 'Is it mist?'

'No, that isn't mist or moonlight,' he told her; 'that's cuckoo-flowers, or ladies'-smocks, as some call them. They grow thick in this piece because there's water underneath. It never goes dry, this field. ...'

Miss Loach, with her watching brief for Time, although the foremost, and the most omnipresent, is by no means the only observer of the microcosm. Almost more important, apart from the atmospheric point of view, are the village doctor, Selby, who

watches it in the interests of science and art, and the Reverend Mr. Winter, who watches in the moral interest. Mr. Winter is, I should say, Mr. Brett Young's most living parson; and Dr. Selby, though here the guess is a thought wilder, I should say is the nearest of his doctors to a self-portrait from his Brixham days.

By the agency of these two observers there enters in a botanizing scientific strictness, a flowerlike empiricism, which gives a new taut note to the prose of the book, down from the powerful opening sentence, worthy of T. H. Huxley:

In this island there are certain localities predestined by Providence for the permanent habitation of birds, beasts and men, since the life of all three is conditioned by the neighbourhood of water

to such things as the vicar's meditation on musk:

... Dr. Selby had explained, in his roguish way, that the colours and scents of flowers were sexual characteristics designed by Nature (he never said 'God') to entice fertilizing insects to visit them. But if that were all, he reflected, how would Selby explain the fact that during his own manhood, all the musk in the world had suddenly lost its perfume? Did this imply a sudden and vindictive decision on the part of God to rob the poor musk of its sexual attractions, which it had doubtless abused? Hardly that. For, now that he came to think of it, the odour of musk (the memory of which, so it seemed, must die with his own generation) had associations of transparent innocence: since, when he was a boy, he remembered, a pot of musk with its

pale hispid leaves had been part of the furniture of every well-ordered nursery, and its scent the very perfume of well-to-do childhood. . . .

The greater part of Mr. Winter's mind, by the way, is in that passage, from his unwilling reverence for science to his professionally bad logic, or bad selection of postulates.

Jack continues to have Jill throughout, although laboriously as is the good Saxon custom. In one affair the labours of no fewer than five gods with machines are called upon to bring her swain to the miller's daughter—which is perhaps after all the way things do happen in villages.

Mr. Brett Young approaches the end of this central book, as is only fitting, with an inquest; and ends it with one of his extraordinary sudden rises to a difficulty so extreme that one had hardly foreseen the possibility of approaching it. The colonel-squire meets, by appointment, the mistress of his dead father. One flinched as one saw its immediate prospect, this encounter, for fear that it should fail. If it had failed, the book would have faltered with it. But it does not fail.

The book is exceptionally full of difficulties solved. Another, less arduous, had already been overcome in the meeting of the colonel with the upstart millionaire from North Bromwich, Hackett, who, to everybody's extreme resentment, turns out to have more right to live in Chaddesbourne than the Ombersleys themselves—that is to say if number of ancestors in the churchyard can have anything to do with the matter, and apparently nothing else has. But the final *rencontre* is much more difficult.

We may remark, too, the development of a new theme—the treatment of Love as a spring epidemic, entering the village in annual waves on the heels of the influenza; and of a motif which has lurked in the background of the novels since *Portrait of Clare*—the coming back of a little girl to her grandfather's house, like the ghost of her mother; and the post-War influences of such general matters as release from the specific oncomings of traffic and other amenities—the influences of such general things as release from the Army and the munition factory, nay even the release from the 'meat-card,' are appointed almost to the dignity of motifs.

XXXI

THE THIRD ELEMENT

THE next two chapters must necessarily be breathless and brief and may very well be entirely wrong-headed, since *White Ladies* was published while this commentary was in proof and bears every evidence of being, like *Jim Redlake*, one of Mr. Brett Young's incalculable little self-indulgences.

For the few points which leap to the eye in it are all in the nature of innovations. Thus, the principal character is the house 'White Ladies,' whose gradual decay, abrupt downfall, grotesque resuscitation and lingering survival, compose the story of the book. The character second in importance is its foil, the factory Hayseech; and the people are parasitical upon the places, except one, and she is a type new to the novels.

The elements in which Mr. Brett Young previously seemed to live are little used in *White Ladies*. Earth no longer seems to blow 'a far-horn prelude all around'; its influences are drawn up into the houses. And water has given way to fire. The uses of atmosphere, needless to say, however, are retained.

These accidentals may or may not be significant. I do not think that they are likely to be of any far-reaching significance; but they are certainly queer and noteworthy. The abandonment of water is particularly, if one may say so, fishy.

One cannot predict over so various a man, and it is ill work (*experto crede*) diagnosing a doctor; but one may play with the fancy if only, sermon-like, eventu-

ally to dismiss it, that the office of water, which has for so long fascinated him, may be for some time exhausted.

Fire was used once before, it is true, in *Cold Harbour*, but mainly there, one feels, to tie up ends unmanageably straying. It hardly seems in place in the longer, leisurely kind of novel. Its advantages as an auxiliary of downfall are, of course, pretty obvious, as are also its accompanying defects of suddenness and, in the ordinary way, of completeness. It is as powerful an agent as flood, but rather too masterful an antecedent.

There are as well (to go perhaps much too far) its sacrificial aspects, remarkable, it may be, when one is dealing with an author who has flirted with Druids and has very surely Brythonic blood in his veins. Although the *White Ladies* fire comes about by accident there is a tinge of the sacrificial in the outcome.

Having at no time proposed to make an ethnological or a psychoanalytical study of Mr. Brett Young, I resign these vague suggestions to any successor to whom they may appeal—and to the historians of the novel; contenting myself with remarking that water may have come to a head (if the phrase be allowable) at Esthwaite Lodge, his summer residence from 1929 to 1932.

Again, even if inclination served, erudition would hardly suffice for a study here of Fire in Fiction. But there is one novelistic quality in fire which has been so far overlooked, I think, by novelists.

The group-novel is growing among us—the novel which studies a set of people under the peculiar relevance of some common place of abode (as in *Grand Hotel*), some common purpose (as in the better detective stories) or some common destiny (as in the *Bridge of San Luis Rey*).

Now, what an imposing opportunity there is awaiting novelists in the employment of fire in what Mr. Chesterton might call its larger domestic use, when it strikes a house in the night and displays the inhabitants naked as like as not but certainly without disguises, without artifice and in all probability without souls, components which in so many of us are assumed, with all the rest, before the morning mirror.

What a study of basic impulses remains to be written by a modern Emily Brontë! In the meantime, although unmoved by these possibilities, Mr. Brett Young has taken his full technical toll of the element, abruptly, it is true, but with great force.

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XXXII

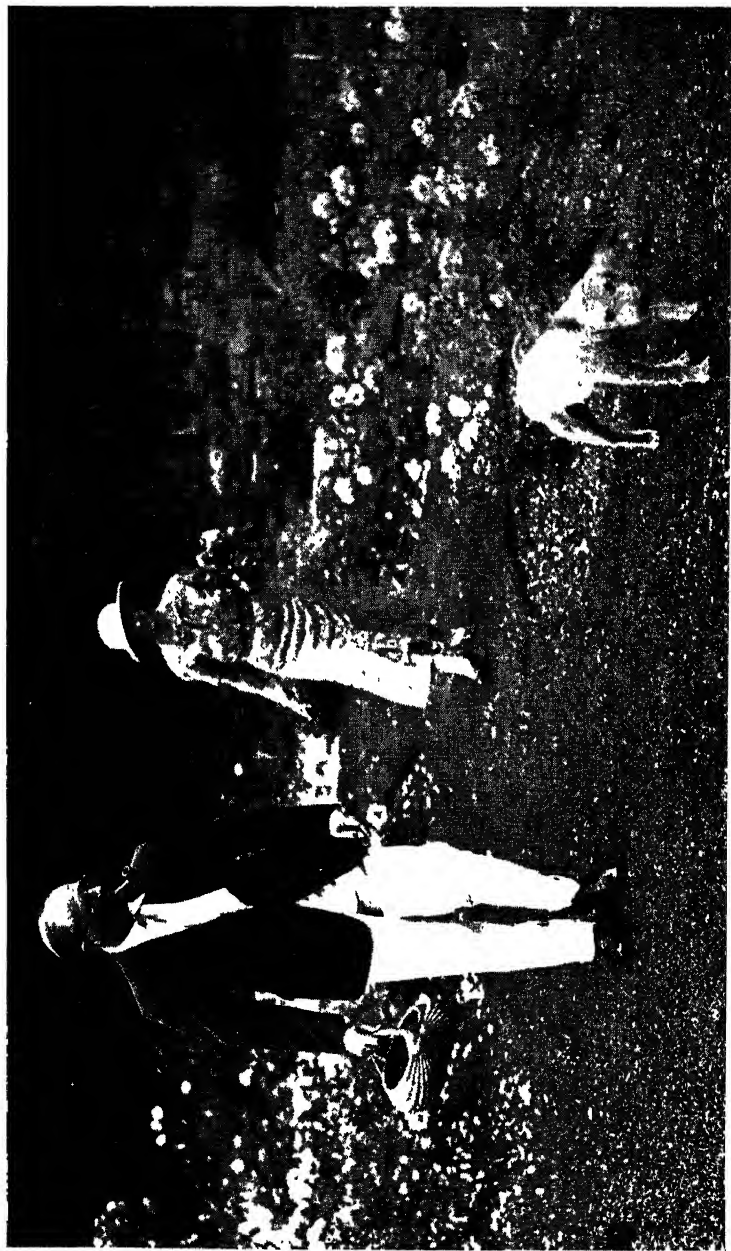
'WHITE LADIES'

BUT this use of fire, although the most striking, is by no means the only noteworthy innovation in *White Ladies*. The central human figure herself, and her mother, capable, business-like, yet charming women in their different traditions, are the first of their kind in the twenty-one novels. Whether one can class these two as private novelistic indulgences, I should not like to pronounce; but I take it that, either consciously or unconsciously they have been invoked for the reason that only people of that kind can really be trusted to take care of houses, and only a person with the obstinate beauty of the daughter would doggedly rebuild after a fire on a large scale, in times like these.

The central house 'White Ladies' itself, must certainly be numbered amongst the indulgences. Mr. Brett Young's houses have always bulked large, and now he really gives his heart to one. An indulgence, too, I should say, although this rather complicates matters, is the half-satirical interval in Capri.

The girls are dispersed all over the book, with a distant manipulation which is half-timid, half-adoring, and can no more be exhibited in quotation than can James Redlake. This is the kind of side-long notation:

. . . standing there like a man in front of the fire
with the shameless cigarette in her lips, Miss Cash
. . . was no longer the remote and essentially cold



ON THE WAY TO THE ORCHARD, WITH 'BAILEY'

headmistress, but a warm human being for whom, Bella felt, she could experience an instinctive adoration. . . . Here was a woman completely emancipated—as witness the cigarette!—yet obviously feminine, without a shred of sentimentality or diffuseness; a woman instinct with style; an aristocrat no less in culture than in feeling—as witness the skill with which she put her visitor at her ease.

Nothing remarkable, one might swear, no more than a schoolgirlish *Schwärmerei*; but no, it is caught up and spread in solution faintly over the book.

The house is more solid, although not so very much more:

And then, of a sudden, the trees seemed to fall back on either side, disclosing, with the effect of a fanfare of trumpets breaking through a murmur of muted strings, above, an enormous expanse of white sky, and below, a wide sward of turf, most piercingly green within the wood's dense circlet. And in the midst of the green sward stood a house.

Not the house she had expected. It was neither great, nor formal, nor yet of stone. It lay isolated in the bottom of that shallow depression like a stone that a jeweller displays on its cloth of velvet—like a sombre ruby, she thought, or better, perhaps, a dusky cornelian; for the rays of the sun, now declining, enriched its substance of ancient brick with a rosy transfusion pervading the clay's compact granules of sand in such fashion that every one of them threw back a minute reflex of light, and each face of the building glowed like the facet of a gem until each window facing her became a crucible of fire and the whole insubstantial structure seemed lapped in flame.

It was the ghost of a house, she told herself—but such a warm ghost, such a kindly ghost in comparison with that cold empty gatehouse!

Aunt Harriet is done no less well, I am not sure that she is not done better, than Mr. Brett Young's other favourite spinsters. She is a fuller Miss Minnet, a finer Miss Loach—it is wonderful what subtle variety he contrives to get into the apparently plain and unvarying outline:

At Witley Lodge nobody ever spoke of White Ladies. Aunt Harriet had decided that it was much better that Bella should not be 'reminded of things.' She herself had no wish to mention it, confessing in confidence that she had 'never liked that place'; there was 'far too much water about it' (one night there had been far too little!), and people who were compelled to live there, or rash enough, as she had been to make a long stay, would certainly pay for their folly in rheumatism. Quite apart from these deep-rooted feelings, the whole incident of White Ladies was a little too recent in date to occupy an important position in Miss Mortimer's uncertain memory. No major event of the last twenty years had the definition or even the interest of trivialities which had taken place during the previous fifty. Among these her memory moved with the instinctive assurance of one who descends a familiar stairway in the dark, without having to count the steps or grope for a hand-rail; but later adventures, such as her crossing of the Alps, had sunk back into the same historical limbo as Hannibal's, and though sometimes—her swollen and knotted fingers shakily pouring out tea—she might be heard to declare that the population of the world was divided into

those people who had visited Rome and those who hadn't, the Eternal City was actually labelled in her memory as the place where one had to send abroad for Garibaldi biscuits. The passage of time had not improved her opinion of the continent of Europe (whose uncivilized inhabitants had dragged her own country into war and made rationing-cards necessary) or, indeed, of any other place at any great distance from the Haysech works.

And Capri, with its singular North European fauna, is as manifest as a lawn at the Zoo, and yet when you come to look closely at it, it too is curiously diffused. So is the fire which operates the whole.

There is a sweet and, for once, really unanswerable nobility in the girl Bella, the re-builder. In fact she is very like a stubborn Clare, and there is something of Clare's son Stephen in her Jasper, if one neglects the dreadful up-to-date way in which Jasper is spoilt. Bella's lovers however, are very unlike Clare's; indeed they too are types new to the novels. But the book ends on a note harmonizing despair and hope, youth and age, renunciation and ennoblement which chimes remarkably with the great moment in the *Portrait*.

Or so it all seems. For, as I remarked before, it is impossible to tell yet what to think about *White Ladies*!

EPILOGUE

XXXIII

EPILOGUE

IN days as querulous as these, in which, as it would seem, reputations of great price are as sensitive as open wounds, and may be damaged irretrievably (but not unremuneratively) by the slightest blow—in which morals and theology are still hedged about by the State, though with less and less excessive anxiety yet with more and more incalculability—a writer who loves and fears his country and his publisher will run once through his manuscript with a close reference to the laws of (1) libel; (2) blasphemy; (3) obscenity.

It has seemed possible to acquit these mild lucubrations on all three counts; but in considering the dangers of the first, and most expensive, in one of its more subtle (and in the experience of many, including the late George Moore, its most dangerous) forms, I have made what seems to be an interesting discovery.

The danger was real enough. No novel is ever published in which some few hundreds of citizens, otherwise normal to the view, do not affect to discern their own features; and since, despite our author's almost unvarying kindly scientific attitude to his people, it has not always been possible for a critic to speak of their little ways with unvarying patience, it has seemed wise to have an especial eye to the chance of damaging a reputation at two removes, as it were. The people in these novels, and particularly the less pleasing people, have an air of coming to life on their

own accounts, outside their proper volumes (although not outside their proper periods, as we have seen); indeed, often in this enquiry I have felt as though I had been ranging along the boundaries of fiction, *fielding* them, as it were, and returning them to their respective books. This is a different matter altogether, of course, from the Balzacian little habit which they have of appearing in each other's little worlds. They are a great deal more real, in fact, than the people one sees in the tube, some of them even than one's acquaintances, which is sometimes an inconvenience at dinner. And so much reality may well not be without its claimants, particularly as reality is scarce among townsfolk nowadays.

The discovery which I think interesting is that very few of the characters in the whole range of the novels, none indeed apart from the doctors when young, one lawyer, the eager Edward Willis, one parson, the external interlocutors in *Cold Harbour* and *The Dark Tower*, Clare's colonel (who quotes Housman and Cobbett), just possibly some of the merchant seamen (seamen have always read at least the work of Bulwer Lytton), and Aunt Cathie who reads in *Romola* but never finishes it—not one of them, apart from this well-defined one per cent of the characters, is ever likely to peruse the novels of Francis Brett Young, much less the comments of his critic. Indeed, apart from these few erudite literati, nobody in the twenty books gives the impression of ever reading at all!

It is a significant distinction, and, once one has the clue to it, it can be traced deeper still. With very rare exceptions, these people, for all their vigorous persuasion of life, have none of the little idiosyncrasies which simplify, for example, the circle of our acquaintances.

Very few of them drink, they are hardly ever seen to smoke; they are not members of clubs or collectors of postage-stamps; they play few games; they borrow no money and lend none, except in the way of business. Einstein and Epstein and 'Torquemada' leave them unimpassioned, uninterested even. Not only do they not read, they do not even read detective stories. These vigorous human beings, bubbling over, one would have supposed, with every sort of life, exhibit, when seen minutely and in the bulk, only just sufficient attributes and singularities to distinguish them from one another for the purposes of the particular argument or theme, upon which they are for the moment engaged. And not only in the early or 'morality' novels, but also in the very latest. Each is, in a sense, no more than a function of the general equation in which he is embodied. They are all distinct, each from each; but the distinction is made with the most rigid economy. It is their quality of sheer living, and that alone, which differentiates them. A Mr. Bulgin has not more viciousness than is necessary for his story, or a Captain Antrim more sadistic stupidity.

In this, it seems to me, if in nothing else, we might detect the mastery of their creator. Only a serene, a sane, a spacious outlook—the attitude of a Tolstoi, to take it at its highest—can thus provide characters so steeply dipped in life itself that it is to a great extent the reader's own vital experience, adding little thicknesses in time and space and human knowledge, thrilling to all this vital stir, which furnishes them forth with details and a semblance. Mr. Brett Young has so much, at least, in common with the greatest exponents of his art, that he has only to despatch

among us one of these missionaries of his vision to ensure, not only its acceptance, but its location in our minds for ever; while in the novels of Dickens, to take creation at its other extreme, the personal vitality of the writer himself must be for ever interpreting over his people, so that, remembered in his absence, lacking his ecstasy, they become flat caricatures, quaintly spouting, with no wider life than is in the neurotic agitation of marionettes.

This is no more than to claim that Mr. Brett Young is of the tribe of Tolstoi and Balzac rather than of Dickens and Thackeray; or, to keep up the exotic parallel, of Tchekoff or de Maupassant. To attempt to go further in *lese majesté* would be flattering to none of the parties; for his vision, if not his manners or his methods, is of the rarest originality; and the time is not yet to award him his place in letters. As the man of Harlech said of Mr. Lloyd George when asked if that statesman was God Almighty: 'He's a young man yet.'

He continues to grow in scope and mastery; but in his essential purpose he remains as he was when first he set out to create. He is a writer of 'moralities'; and the themes of moralities, though mixed with all the airs of England, are but few, upon whatever scale they may be conceived. He is as deeply intuitive, and certainly as poetical in his approaches to life, as any novelist writing. He is also as various superficially; by which I do not mean to suggest that his 'plots' have that somewhat self-conscious originality which has taken so firm a hold on so many of our bright young spirits—although he has invented, if that can be said to be possible, at least two wholly new sorts of 'plot'—but that by subtle variations of attitude to his

themes he throws an entirely new light upon his little cosmos with every fresh examination of it.

Again a musical analogy presents itself, which again must not be pursued. But of his themes, the decay of Beauty and the permanence of the enveloping earth, we have spoken in full. It is upon the character of his human material, upon the great crowd of life which he has created (in the last analysis the absolute criterion for a novelist's work) that we may most profitably fix our parting gaze.

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In nothing do people differ so much and in nothing is the difference so manifest, not in morals, breeding, learning or even intelligence, as in the degree to which they simply live. What is probably a good half of civilized humanity seems to be entirely out of sympathy with life, and to be engaged throughout its waking hours (in sleep, as we hear from Vienna and Zurich, the whirligig of Life brings its revenges) in hiding itself from the profounder aspects of existence. Daily business grows daily more artificial; the son of Hodge aims at an office-stool or an oil-rag and usually achieves the one or the other. Leisure falls increasingly under mechanical or arbitrary laws. Most people are by now acutely unhappy unless they are living wholly in some artificial microcosm, whether it be the social routine of Balham or Mayfair, or the smaller worlds governed by the rules of bridge or golf or the crossword puzzle or the operation of mechanical forms of transport. The incidental remark of Villiers de l'Isle d'Adam, ages ago, that we shall require our living to be done by our servants, seems to sum up the present prospect pretty well—except that our

servants probably live less even than we do. It is a comfortable aphorism and, as in the matter of hunting, shooting and fishing, I will offer no opinion on its justice. The point is one which need not be laboured. One of its aspects may be taken as significant of the whole—the growing agitation against blood-sports. So far as the ethical point of view goes, it may be neglected here, since man, taken from the æsthetic side, is not in the bulk an instinctively ethical animal and is not required to be. Except that it is called upon in certain circumstances to represent ethics, art has no concern with such philosophies. The artist must avoid the categorical imperative; and so, unless the artist has failed on his side, must the critic. Sufficient is it for us to observe that the far-reaching, easy-going, inchoate country pastimes of shooting and hunting and fishing are falling out of fashion and, what is more important here, out of literature; and it is very much to our present purpose to notice that for the novels of Mr. Brett Young, bridge and the crossword puzzle do not exist and the ball-games only in their looser social references. When his people disport themselves they hunt or fish or shoot; but their leisure hours, for all that one is allowed to see to the contrary, are almost solely employed in the most fundamental of social relationships. For them the mere living of life is the essential matter.

It is curious to examine how little the need for procuring the necessary bread and butter is allowed to affect their personalities. The principal personages seem hardly to have to earn their livings at all, except the soldiers and the clergy, and the miners and navvies, whose employments lie near to the root of the matter. Those personages at the centre of interest

who are entirely men of affairs—lawyers and publicans these, almost without exception—are employed in furthering the basic vital needs of each other. Only with the doctors, whose whole affair is with Life, is the earning of a livelihood brought on to the centre of the stage.

It is not until they are examined in bulk that these facts become strikingly evident; and not many readers of novelists are likely to feel called upon to undertake such a labour as a numbering of heads. Even critics have a habit of shunning the job. There seems, indeed, to be an unwritten law that a critic, like a poet, ought not to count with anything like precision. It is perhaps understandable that a poet should be expected to disguise his interest in mathematics (although quite a number, nowadays, are expert mathematicians). Wordsworth will never be quite forgiven, and perhaps justly, for his pre-occupation with the dimensions of things, particularly for his statement that he had measured something or other and found it to be so many feet long and so many wide. In the same way, not so justly, those useful repertories of voluminous authors which are published by undocketed scholars from time to time—the excellent Proust repertory is perhaps the most useful as well as the latest example—are treated with humorous neglect. It is with some diffidence, therefore, that I admit to having carried out a rapid census of the people in the twenty novels of our author. Nevertheless it would be impossible to disguise the fact, for its results are relevant and exciting.

Mr. Brett Young, to as great an extent probably as any novelist (for Proust's volumes are all one novel) is inclined to introduce characters from one novel into

another. The custom is deplored by Mr. Percy Lubbock for reasons which, an unwonted negligence, he does not give very clearly. Whether it be deplorable or no, it seems clear enough why writers do it. They do it, in the first place because their people are real to them and they are loath to let them go; and in the second because, since life, as mere vital existence, is of the highest value imaginable to them, they instinctively practise economy in bestowing it. And perhaps again because, while it is comparatively easy to construct workable waxwork figures and jointed wooden figures capable of pleasing antics and utterances in kind, the making of life is never undertaken without pain—even though that pain may be preceded by pleasure of a somewhat unsettling description.

If for no other reason, this reappearance of characters becomes speedily attractive when one comes to read the books again—and there are few novelists who improve more on a second (or third) reading. Thus, the engaging booth-boxer in *The Black Diamond* takes on a new thickness, and Abner's feat in flooring him gains an awe-inspiring patina, when we have witnessed Inspector Frome, swaggering to the Penningtons, produce a piece of the rope which hanged him. *The Young Physician's* first employer acquires new squalor in *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington*; and Marsden, the corresponding philosopher of the *Undergrowth* journals, becomes one of the joint narrators in *The Dark Tower*, and hovers as the rumour of a musical critic over other novels. That kind of fun is unlimited; and the mind likes, too, to play with identifications less authentic—as, for example, whether Ah Qui, the Chinese steward in *Sea Horses*, can have been the Ah Qui who helped the one-armed elephant-hunter in *The Crescent*

Moon (himself a great re-appearer) away from trouble with a girl in China.

But there has proved to be more in this census-taking than that. It has revealed to what an uncommon variety of creatures (as distinct from types) Mr. Brett Young has given life—ranging from royalty (one elegant duke, full-length in *The Red Knight* and one exquisite princess who fitfully but punctually appears in a drawing-room in *Jim Redlake* and sits breathing delicate half-compliments) down to several dogs and horses and 'Jerry,' a poltergeist. These extremes are single acts of creation and do not visit other books. In between, amidst the vast classes of lush parvenus with their rich vitality, and the old aristocracy with their impoverished acres, both sets superbly done, he has created no fewer than thirty-three doctors of medicine at full-length—again a world's record, one supposes. Of these, some indeed appear only for a moment, in a vivifying phrase or so, but the majority are so lovingly cherished that each of the books, including the volume of short stories, contains on an average 3.38 of them!

I will not betray any more of the results of this microcosmical census which, in any case, was carried out with the respectable amateur lack of thoroughness and accuracy, except to mention that it shows up very well the absence of certain classes of employed persons, not only from the centre of Mr. Brett Young's attention (where in fact as we have seen they hardly figure at all) but also from the ornamental edges. Servants, publicans, cabmen, postmen, postmistresses, policemen, monthly nurses, warders, furniture-salesmen on the hire-purchase system, those clerks who book railway-tickets or transatlantic passages, and all

such minor ministers to human relationships, who facilitate intercourse or repair the course of true love—all these abound. The navvies and miners and agriculturalists are almost beyond count—quite beyond the count of a self-respecting amateur. These are the men employed about the business of the soil or what lies under it. Those who own the land, too (a hardly less laborious process, as we are told) if not innumerable, are at any rate numerous enough to make any attempt to detail them or their family-trees very speedily abortive if not conducted with professional agility.

Manufacturers are numerous, and there is a tendency to invoke nail-makers, a class for which Mr. Brett Young has quite an exuberant affection, perhaps partly in tribute to Joseph Chamberlain, but certainly fed by his childhood's memories of domestic nailmaking in the nailhouses built on to private houses in the Hales Owen of forty years ago. (The nailhouses are still there but, as we complained at the outset, the pleasant tintintabulations which used to issue from them all day long have ceased long ago—they are turned into wash-houses, perhaps bathrooms.) Soldiers are not very frequent except in the naturalistic *Woodsmoke* and in the war parts of the larger novels; and indoor workers, clerks (except booking-clerks, for these are at the door of the open spaces), typists and whatnot, make only the most transitory appearances, except in the naturalistic *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington*. Seafaring men appear with some frequency, but only one man-o'-war's man—in the sub-lieutenant who is Gabrielle Hewish's first lover. Sailors of the fighting service inhabit a world of their own and, except to facilitate travel, seem available only for treatment at large in humorous or 'war' stories.

The Civil Service does not come in at all, although Arthur Payne, the mad boy who is Gabrielle's third lover, is at one time thought to be destined for it. He finds his destiny, however, we guess from a later book, in the Canadian Army, which seems in every way more suitable. Apart from this aborted entry the devoted class is unrepresented. It appears rarely in fiction. The Civil Service swings hermetically, like Mahomet's coffin, in a faint hierarchical illumination high above the airs which bathe the vociferous classes, and is unavailable for these social segmentations; for, necessary and admirable, even decorative, institution though it is, it possesses no channel of communication (save through the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries) with the beating heart of England. Actors, also, do not come in at all, but then actors, by hypothesis are not real, except the greatest, who mould their parts to themselves and, by hypothesis, are hardly actors. Incidentally it may be remarked that architects are entirely absent except for one straggler in *White Ladies*, although their works are delighted in, and although civil engineers play a prominent part. For this neglect of a deserving set of men there seems to be no reason.

The great novelists (it seems almost trite to say it, and certainly trite to repeat it, but the point must not be lost) have always been life-givers. So generally true is this, and so automatically has it been perceived by an unobservant world that when a life-giver who, through some deficiency—default of high seriousness, perhaps, or it may even be too much sense of humour—seems to fall short of the utmost variety, the majority of critics fall into a hopeless state of uneasiness over him. Trollope is an instance of this, and so, on an

infinitely larger scale, is Dickens again, the incredibility of whose characters is the perpetual cause of civil war amongst learned commentators. Perhaps they look too long at *Pickwick*, until their eyes dazzle. The fact seems to be unblinkable that in life-giving, as in narrowness of observation, Dickens had as great a genius as the sun has looked on; but that he lacked poetry and was nowhere near the first flight in the use of language, that he lacked taste and moderation, that he was ineducable and therefore too liable to be caught up in temporal and parochial affairs, and that an impish bent in him, a supreme confidence in his supreme powers, combined with irrepressible and usually inexcusable boisterousness, continually impelled him to inform cardboard cuttings, selected for their grotesque appearance, with a vitality which, terrific though it is, will not survive the withdrawal of his incantations. These will flap away with undiminished vigour whilst any shred of his world remains. But his genuine people live and breathe for ever.

Here one verges upon heresy; but at least there will be little disagreement that so it is with all those prolific hystericals, gigantic rabbits of the literary field, who may be called the illiterate great: those writers like the late Marie Corelli, who seem to be entirely without intellectual gifts, and yet never fail of an immense audience at which the cognoscenti never, never preside.

An uneasy difference of opinion is to be found among critical minds in the face of those writers who are unable to impart their own intense vitality, who lay the fire with instinctive exactitude but are unable to light it. Perhaps Arnold Bennett was one

of these, although a generation which was brought up on *The Old Wives' Tale* will find any such easy assignment hard to accept. But then Time so laps that book that what is taken away far more than what is given is at the centre of attention.

The uneasiness of critics when faced with a vital difficulty has led, as it does in all walks of life, to a tendency to panic and mistake the enemy. It has not been the object of the present argument to take part in, or initiate, any differences of opinion; but it cannot close without paying some attention to an admiring uneasiness of this kind which troubles some of the finest sensibilities among contemporary critics when they consider Mr. Brett Young, and concentrate too much upon his themes and too little upon the fund of life in him. Let Sir John Squire speak for them, as he should :

There is no living English novelist with more to his credit. He is a poet with a sense of fact, a feeling for history and an interest in character; the combination is rare. He is also a doctor, and doctors know a great deal. But let him, as one of the few survivors of a generation who were mostly killed—who stand between the elderly Victorians and the impatient and disgusted young—remember that it is his duty and glory as a born poet to come down on the poetic side of the fence. If he does he will write better things than he has ever written, good though all his painstaking novels about climbing to Heaven from Charing Cross may be. He has written twenty good novels in which poet, physician, romancer and realist have collaborated. Let him now attempt an integration and let himself go—not bothering about pipe-lines, which are all very well in their way.

Sutor ne supra crepidam judicaret! That is what an unhappy novelist gets from a poet, critic and friend, for venturing in a preface upon the slightest piece of ruminating introspection. The offence was no more than this:

Searching for some common factor, some symbol which, however slender, might appropriately find place in each of the series and give, to the writer if not to the reader, the satisfaction of a pervading unity, I hit upon the theme of the Welsh water-supply which the city of Birmingham . . . had lately secured in the wilds of the Radnorshire massif. This huge engineering scheme, by which part of the head-waters of the Wye were to be diverted from their natural outlet in the Bristol Channel, conveyed through a monstrous pipe-line to the Birmingham storage reservoirs, and finally dissipated, through the city's drainage system, into the Trent and the North Sea, was one of my youth's most impressive circumstances. The pipe-line . . . discharged its flow into the new reservoir . . . having traversed, as the crow flies, all that country which was the cradle of my young imagination. As a boy I had seen the vast work in progress at many unexpected points in its course. My father's surgery at Hales Owen . . . was daily crowded with navvies, whose corduroys were stained with the red earth of the workings. Here, then, was the unifying factor that I wanted. The Midland novels were to be strung along that pipe-line as beads are threaded on a string.

Let us strive to hold the balance straight. That simple confession (taken from the preface to the new edition of *The Black Diamond*) might hardly expect to draw the mildest lightnings from so wise and universal a poet as Sir John (particularly after so sound and under-

standing a piece of prefatory criticism), who while he is known to hold strong views about whether knickerbockers and the drainage have a proper place in verse, has himself contrived a magnificently symphonic interplay of symbols out of such unpromising material as a university Rugby match and a Chicago meatyard. When one gets down to essentials, there is singularly little difference between the idea of the Birmingham pipe-line and the idea of a canning-factory; but nevertheless, the one is on a considerably more imposing scale, is placed amid more pleasant sights and sounds, affects more men, and provides just as fair a scope for moralization.

On the other hand it is all a little over-elaborate, this confession, and I cannot help thinking that the degree of volition involved in the choice of a symbol looms too large in retrospect; that there was not quite so much ranging round in quest of a steadying thread as Mr. Brett Young implies and seems to remember. I am prepared to swear that the pipe-line selected itself, and that if it had not been there, Uff-down or Astill's Ales would have done as well for that purpose of liaison. If I remember anything of the mind of a boy, then that 'as the crow flies' is the operative part of the reminiscence. Lived there ever a boy whose heart did not beat faster when he found himself on a Roman road or saw a Roman aqueduct? The same noble directness in the railways has, I believe endeared those tracks to the hearts of boys for ever, despite all the counter-attractions of 'plane and car. And then there was the excavation that accompanied it all in the making, for when could a boy resist a hole in the earth? And there were the smelly high-priests of the secret subsoil, with their cut fingers

and black eyes, swearing, or insinuating, oaths magnificently in the waiting-room. . . . That pipe-line simply fluted to the youth of Birmingham for a poet, epic if available.

It was lucky to attract one, all the same. Poets have not been too common in those parts since the days of Shenstone.

And the pipe-line having wormed itself into the boy's imagination and attracted and fixed around itself the ideas of all sorts of diggings and scrapings and explorations of the soil, these surrounded themselves with an excited aura of archæology and the insides of the earth. That is the way things happen in the soul: the vague conception usually precedes the exact desire; and the exact desire produces scholarship or poetry as the case may dictate.

And that brings us to our penultimate consideration.

Mr. Brett Young has not, I think it safe to assume, the natural disposition of an archæologist; yet many archæological sidelines, interests with an affective rather than an intellectual tinge, seem to have become entangled with this idea, one aspect of which is a persistent inclination to bring in inscriptions on clock-faces and bells or round lintels and chimney-pieces, or in hats. And even about his interest in families there is something geological, a tendency to regard them rather as systems of stratification than as the products of family trees.

It is not clear what Sir John wishes Mr. Brett Young to do, when he shall have stopped writing about his pipe-line. And in fact the pipe-line, though in its very grandeur it bulks large in the reader's imagination takes up really very little room in the novels—far less than Sir Joseph Astill, the brewer, with his ales, and

has no more influence on them, *Undergrowth* and *The House Under The Water* excepted. Even in the development and decline of Abner Fellows, the brews of Sir Joseph have an influence as profound as the working on the excavation.

I venture to predict that he will not alter much in his aim, which is to depict life, whatever the exhortation or inducement, although to his curiously elastic prose we may perhaps legitimately look for new developments. It has been in constant use for a generation and still retains its freshness and its versatility. In each book its light aroma has changed. There is no reason to suppose that we shall not receive as many novels more as we have already; and even less to believe that the subjects, or even the themes, will be very different. There is the stuff for many lives' work in the interval in Time and Space which Mr. Brett Young has set himself to explore, and *This Little World* and *White Ladies* are more full of dramatic situations perfectly executed than any of the others.

Whether his prose will change still further, and if it does, in what direction, I find it impossible to predict. It is hardly likely to become a short-rhythmed instrument, and yet there have been signs in the more discursive novels that even so radical an alteration may not be entirely outside its scope. I am convinced only of two things; that it will grow in beauty (good prose is one of the few things in life capable of infinite improvement) and increase in competency. Particularly, as Bishop Furse might say, the latter. There is a downward curve in what may be called the temperature of the novels. Fine tragedy though *The House Under The Water* succeeds in being there is less passion in it than in, say, *The Tragic Bride* or even *The Red*

Knight. There are such suggestions as these that the management may very well approach closer and closer to what would be the commonplace in other men. *Mr. and Mrs. Pennington*, competent piece of natural history that it was, shows what a masterpiece remains to be written still about the soul of the suburbs. It is exactly the kind of story which only a prose style, never trite, never far from elevated, but on the other hand never precise enough to let the subject fall wholly back into its native banality, can hope to handle at all: only such a style as Mr. Brett Young has now attained—a transcendental wordiness under whose enchantment the drabest of current creatures may be made to glitter dubiously, as might a sloven dragonfly; under which, with its thousand effects of illumination, the most ponderous commonplace takes on the graces of rarity and the lights of fashion, and is to be seen in the more idle intervals cavorting sweetly like an albino but nimble and complaisant elephant in a torchlight procession. This poetical-pragmatical handling is seen in perfection in *This Little World*.

Or he may treat more and more calmly of the more classical aspects of the deeper country as in his last two books. The conflict of all that was beautiful with its latest adversaries, the squalor and the traffic, may in large part engage his attention—although I hardly think that it will. The ghost of Shenstone, shivering above the ruined Leasowes, may whisper him back to that eighteenth-century vogue with which, once or twice, notably at the opening of *The Iron Age*, he has seemed to be toying; but that, I think, is a period of growth which is now left behind. Or, if his naturalistic outlook should develop, a plague of stringency may set in upon his vocabulary,

and he may yet turn out chapters beautiful as the whirl in Orion and chill as the music from that outer nebula. Or he may continue to hint at these things, to compose a distant harmony of them all, to combine all their far echoes, and write as we know him to.

This seems to be the likelier probability; that he will remain in all essentials the man we know, a man whom, essentially, it is impossible to prophesy over. There may be more *Dark Towers* in the offing, who can tell, or unbreakable *Tragic Brides*. Or he may simply add vistas and colour and life—and ideas blended musically—to his huge canvas. Who, as I asked in an earlier chapter, would elect to chose between two such profitable alternatives? I hardly know if I betray a confidence in revealing that I heard him saying ruefully not long ago (it was at breakfast, a time when all imaginative men are rueful) that he would still like to write an epic; to which I could only reply in my heart (and not there alone) that I know of no man who is engaged upon a greater.

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